

BEYOND JOHN BROWN:
*JENNIE CHAMBERS AND HARPERS FERRY

by

Barbara K. Post

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Date: _____

1/29/07

Approved: _____

Sydney Nathans

Sydney Nathans, Supervisor

A project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Liberal Studies Program
in the Graduate School of
Duke University

2007

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To my mother,
Shirley Louise Smith Kelly,
and in memory of my father,
Vincent Augustine Kelly,
two among the Greatest Generation,
who always showed up

With love,
admiration,
and gratitude



Frontispiece. The Gap, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, oil painting attributed to Jennie Chambers, 1844-1907.

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PREFACE

When I began this project, I intended to tell a different story – a story about how John Brown’s raid and the Civil War affected the lives of the Chambers family, ordinary people living in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Ordinary people, and yet also extraordinary, because, if, as some historians contend, the Civil War actually began with John Brown’s raid, then the Chambers family, living at Ground Zero, experienced our great national conflict from its inception on that fateful October day.

Through studying the written record of their lives preserved in the Jennie Chambers Papers at Duke University, I wanted to find out what was it like for the Chambers family to live on the border between North and South, in a town that was first the target of terrorists and then the target of both the Union and the Confederate armies. As Virginia seceded and the Civil War began, and as Harpers Ferry found itself caught in a tug of war between opposing armies, how did this staunchly Unionist family fare, living in a small town split by divided loyalties?

Many families fled Harpers Ferry during the war, including the Chambers. Out of a pre-war population of approximately three thousand, only about one hundred people remained in Harpers Ferry throughout the war. When the Chambers returned after the war, along with other old and new citizens, how did they reconcile their former loyalties to live together in community? How did the Chambers, in their reconstituted hometown, experience peace?

As I began my research in earnest, I realized that the Chambers were not going to answer my questions. They left very little written record about the impact of living in a town shattered by conflicting loyalties. In general, they acted on their principles, but they

did not write about the consequences of doing so. During the war, both Edmund and Jennie Chambers each paid a public and personal price for their “inveterate unionism.” Years later, Jennie recalled the first Confederate occupation in 1861. In a brief reference to intra-community conflict, she described the “loyal people of the town” as being “humiliated” by the secessionists and noted “the friend of former days no longer looked into your eyes in true sympathy.”

Yet after the war was over, when the people of Harpers Ferry continued to battle each other over many issues -- such as property ownership; or loyalty oaths; or whom among them could vote, or be a teacher or a lawyer; or whether they liked having Storer College and its northern teachers in their midst; or whether Jefferson County was legally part of the State of West Virginia -- the Chambers family left no written comments about the ferment. Possibly, they were too busy getting on with the task of rebuilding their lives and Harpers Ferry.

As I made my way through the four boxes of letters and papers in the Jennie Chambers collection, spanning the years from 1838 to 1936, I was powerfully drawn to Jennie. As I handled letters that had been written to Jennie and to her sisters and mother, as I read essays she had written on various subjects, as I poured over letters written by her father and others in support of the family’s war claims, and as I began to get a sense of her priorities from what she chose to save, I discovered that Jennie’s life was both remarkable and poignant, a life that I wanted to share with others. I felt particularly close to this nineteenth century woman as I read and transcribed the love letters written to her from Charles Davies, her suitor of many years.

Unfortunately, Jennie preserved only a few documents recording her inner thoughts and feelings – a confession of her first love, a tribute to reformer Frances Willard, an essay explaining the ways in which she loved Harpers Ferry, and a poem. In addition, she wrote essays on various subjects, usually of historical interest, in which she would occasionally editorialize, offering some limited insight into her beliefs and character. The manuscript collection contained no diary or journal and no personal letters from Jennie to others. A search for the letters and papers of Charles Davies, which might contain letters written by Jennie, yielded no such collection.

In search of additional information about Jennie, I began to travel. At Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, I consulted the library and archives, making extensive use of the microfilm collection of local newspapers published in Jennie's era, *Virginia Free Press*, *Spirit of Jefferson*, and *Farmers Advocate*, and well as of the detailed census data for Harpers Ferry. David Fox, a Park Ranger in the Division of Interpretation, generously shared his collection of information about the Chambers family with me. Mr. Fox and others, in particular volunteer intern Mr. Gene Wilkins, have been compiling documentation about the family since 2004 when the National Park Service acquired the property where the Chambers farm once stood. While at Harpers Ferry, I visited nearby Shepherd University's Scarborough Library to search for Storer College records and other primary source material. I contacted the Jefferson County Courthouse for Jennie's birth and/or death records, but the County Clerk's office had no records for Jennie Chambers.

Surprisingly, the letters and papers collected for the Federal Writers' Project in West Virginia in the 1930's contained many essays on the history of Harpers Ferry and

one poem written by Jennie Chambers. I first consulted the transcriptions of this material located in the Library of Congress and then found the originals at the University of West Virginia in Morgantown. Also at the University of West Virginia, I searched the papers of the Reverend Nathan C. Brackett, one of the founders of Storer College, for the full text of his eulogy of Jennie. At the National Archives, I researched the affidavits, letters, and depositions documenting Edmund Chambers' Civil War claims.

In search of context about the family, I listened to a 2005 taped interview with Julia Chambers Littlejohn's granddaughter, Mrs. Ethel Adams, which was conducted by Mr. Wilkins for the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. I subsequently spoke to Mrs. Adams' two daughters by telephone in an attempt to track down some of Jennie's paintings or other family memorabilia.

To provide general historical context, I used numerous secondary sources, some written during Jennie's lifetime. The contemporaneous histories included J. E. Norris' *History of the Lower Shenandoah Valley* (1890), Granville Davisson Hall's *The Rending of Virginia* (1902), and Joseph Barry's *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry* (1903). Definitive works on Jefferson County included two titles by Millard K. Bushong, *A History of Jefferson County West Virginia* (1941), and the later enhanced version, *Historic Jefferson County* (1972). More recently published histories included Jim Comstock's *The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia* (1974), Otis K. Rice and Stephen W. Brown's *West Virginia, A History* (1993), Chester G. Hearn's *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry During the Civil War* (1996), and William A. Link's *Roots of Secession* (2003).

The most helpful resources on more targeted topics in Harpers Ferry history were Merritt Roe Smith's *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology* (1977), Paul A. Shackel's *Culture Change and the New Technology* (1996), and Ralph H. Lewis' *An Historical Sketch of Camp Hill-Wesley Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia* (1996).

I used other secondary sources as well, primarily for social and cultural context, which are listed in the bibliography. They included excellent books on nineteenth century love, courtship and singleness, a treatise on alcohol as an American tradition, and a fascinating study of the Civil War in American memory. To verify details of Jennie's account of John Brown's raid, I consulted Stephen B. Oates' second edition of *To Purge This Land with Blood* (1984) and also David S. Reynold's *John Brown, Abolitionist* (2005).

I found Jennie Chambers in Harpers Ferry, as well. As I toured the historical park, walking along the streets she walked, and visiting the sites she described, I felt as if I were seeing the town through her eyes. I was moved to find the site where Jennie and her family were buried, on a hill in the old Harper cemetery, a place that Jennie and the Ladies of the Grave Yard Committee had once tended with such care. Perhaps I felt closest to her when walking on the Bolivar Heights property that once belonged to her family. Now part of the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, it is accessible via the Murphy Farm Trail. The site of the Chambers farm, Buena Vista, is Stop 5, and the view of the Shenandoah is every bit as magnificent as Jennie described it. I thought of her words, "Judge my ardor not too harshly in regard to my admiration and loyalty for the Old home of my fathers," and appreciated her faithful witness to her heritage.

NOTES TO THE READER

All cited letters, essays, and other unpublished documents are from the Jennie Chambers Papers, preserved at the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library of Duke University, unless otherwise noted.

All cited materials from the West Virginia Collection at the University of West Virginia, Morgantown, West Virginia are from the West Virginia Writers' Program, part of the Federal Writers' Project, Work Projects Administration.. The are located in Box 92 (Harpers Ferry & Factbook) and Box 93 (Factbook).

Cited newspaper articles include both page and column numbers, e.g., p_c_.

INTRODUCTION

Jennie Chambers was fifteen years old when John Brown invaded her home town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Writing about the event over forty years later, she described how threatened she had felt by this sudden and violent attack and how frightened she had been for her family. According to her account, on Monday morning, October 17, 1859, she was on her way to school at the Young Ladies Seminary, just cresting the hill toward town, when she saw a crowd of men “riding up and down the streets, shouting and brandishing their guns.” She recounted a visceral response, feeling as if “my heart stopped beating,” then dropping her books and racing back home. As she ran home, a mile through the woods, she thought of nothing, except to warn her mother. Once there, she and other women helped melt lead and mould bullets, as her father and a company of eighty Harpers Ferry Guards gathered and prepared “to bring on the battle” at the arsenal. She watched as her father and the other men “marched down the hill” to quell the attack, while she and her mother, along with the other women and children, waited “back of the hills” in agony, fearing for their own lives and for the lives of their loved ones.

Looking back on that unforgettable day, the older Jennie described her youthful fear vividly. Throughout her story, she evoked an atmosphere of lurking, but unknown, danger, using such phrases as “the horrible, strange peril in the air,” “a strange silence on the road,” “some dreadful thing was happening,” “terrible suspense,” and “this night of terror.” In her active imagination, Abolitionists were like cannibals, who “might jump out at me from behind a tree – and eat me.”¹

¹ Jennie Chambers, “What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown’s Raid,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 104, (1902): 311-318. *

It was an intense day for an impressionable, naïve, adolescent girl, but it was only the beginning. Jennie Chambers was at the vortex of an event that sparked the Civil War. In the eighteen months between John Brown's invasion and the beginning of the war, the people of the State of Virginia engaged in a bitter and protracted debate over secession. Those living in western Virginia, like Jennie and her family, on a border between North and South, demonstrated deep and conflicting loyalties. Jennie's father, Edmund Hillary Chambers, an armorer working for the United States Government at the Harpers Ferry Arsenal, was a staunch and outspoken Unionist. Jennie and the rest of her family followed Edmund's lead.

Once the Civil War began, Harpers Ferry became a battleground and a place of strategic importance for the opposing armies. For the civilians residing there, Edmund Chambers likened it to living "between two fires." From the time of John Brown's invasion on October 16, 1859 until the final reoccupation by the Union forces on July 8, 1864, Harpers Ferry changed hands fourteen times.² These repeated assaults and takeovers left the town in ruins.

In the midst of this tug of war for Harpers Ferry, Jennie Chambers and her family saw a great deal of action, aiding and abetting the Union forces whenever they could. In September 1862, Jennie and her family witnessed a major battle from the cellar of their home, with shells exploding all around. Not long after this battle, a disastrous Union defeat resulting in the surrender of 11,000 U.S. soldiers, Edmund Chambers moved his family to Bridesburg, Pennsylvania, where he took a job with Mr. Barton Jenks, a U.S.

² Chester G. Hearn, *Six Years of Hell : Harpers Ferry During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 290.

Government contractor, for the duration of the war. Ironically, soon after the Chambers family left Harpers Ferry, Union troops destroyed their farm and property.

Chapter 1 introduces the story of Jennie's life by taking a look at her experiences from John Brown's raid through the end of the Civil War. It describes Edmund and Mary Chambers, her father and mother, and places Jennie within the context of her family and their values. It further discusses how, as Jennie saw her life and her world threatened by outside forces, she and her loved ones responded to the invasions by protecting what they believed in and held most dear: each other, their home, their faith, their community, and their country. Finally, this chapter considers how Jennie, in her youth, had an unparalleled opportunity to understand and to choose what was important to her, to see in clear relief what she loved best and most.

As she grew into a young woman, Jennie experienced other loves as well. Chapter 2 explores Jennie's romantic, but thwarted, relationships with two men. She fell in love with the first, a young soldier from Alabama, in wartime when she was eighteen. She began a long courtship with the second, a lawyer twenty years her senior, just after returning to Harpers Ferry after the Civil War. Jennie encountered, loved, and lost these two very different men during two distinct and separate periods of her life. This chapter seeks to bridge those periods, Jennie's wartime and post-war existence, through an understanding of her experiences in love.

Chapter 3 picks up Jennie's story after the Civil War, as she and her family returned to rebuild their lives in Harpers Ferry. Jennie was twenty-one years old, an adult, and she had life before her. This chapter focuses on how Jennie integrated the loyalties that she so clearly identified in wartime – her family, her home, her faith, her

community, and her country – into her life after the war. It considers whether these loyalties would continue to hold sway, to be her passions in peacetime, or whether something, or someone, else would displace them in her heart.

As an adolescent and as a young woman, Jennie Chambers lived her life in bold, bright technicolor. She embraced life and death and love and loss against a dark backdrop of repeated invasions and assaults on the safety and security of her home and family. She played a pivotal part in the home front drama of this war, which was enacted upon a national, even a world, stage. Because many of the social conventions were suspended during wartime, Jennie was free to assert herself and to be rewarded for it. Her life was intense, its pace accelerated. As a young person, she may have expected to live the rest of her life at this exhilarating level.

A contemporary of Jennie's, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who fought in the Civil War and who later served as Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, spoke movingly on more than one occasion about the "incommunicable experience of war," about his generation's shared exhilaration of experiencing "the passion of life to its top." In an address delivered for Memorial Day, May 30, 1884, at Keene, New Hampshire, he exhorted his audience to look to the future, to "find new fields for action or thought, and make for ourselves new careers," because "we know well that we cannot live in associations with the past alone." He also reminded them that the generation that carried on the war was forever set apart by its experience. He regarded it his generation's "great good fortune" that "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire," that it was given to them "to learn

at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing.”³

As a girl, Jennie Chambers was touched with fire. In its white hot light, Jennie, tested by adversity, well may have seen who she might become. Was this youthful experience, as it was for Holmes, her “great good fortune?” As a nineteenth century woman living in Harpers Ferry, did the memory of the girl and the fire help her become the person she wanted to be or did it hinder her from leading a fulfilling life?

In examining the record of Jennie’s life, one finds no evidence showing she harbored the frustration or disappointment of unmet expectations based on the extraordinary experiences of her youth. On the contrary, the evidence seems to indicate that she shared Holmes’ conviction that life was indeed a profound and passionate thing, and, as a God-given gift, too precious to be squandered.

The next three chapters seek to tell the story of Jennie Chambers, first a girl, then a woman, an individual who revered and respected her heritage, an activist who worked, in her own lady-like way, for the betterment of Harpers Ferry’s future. They chronicle how, out of the fire of her youth, Jennie Chambers forged a productive and useful life, becoming an artist, a businesswoman, a reformer, an historian, and a preservationist, all the while continuously seeking to improve herself and to serve others.

³ Arlington National Cemetery, "Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. : Captain and Brevet Colonel, U.S. Army, Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court," (www.arlingtoncemetery.net, 2006). Quoting O.W. Holmes, Jr. in Memorial Day Address, Keene, New Hampshire, 30 May 1884, and in Memorial Day Address, Harvard University, 30 May 1895.

CHAPTER 1

TOUCHED WITH FIRE

Born in 1844, Jennie Chambers lived her life* in the town of Harpers Ferry and in the residence of her parents, Edmund Hillary and Mary Miller Chambers. Edmund and Mary Chambers dedicated themselves to each other, their family, their faith, and their community. They built their lives on these commitments. So, although many left Harpers Ferry during the Civil War, never to return, Jennie's parents seemed determined to stay the course -- not merely to survive or endure, but to make things better. Jennie, eldest daughter, became a blend of the values and visions of each of her parents. Forged in the crucible of John Brown's invasion and the Civil War, she emerged from these events ready to carry their torch into the next generation.

* Note: During the Civil War, Jennie and her family lived in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania for three years.

A Father's Vision: Buena Vista

Armorer

From the time he was a young man, Jennie's father, Edmund Chambers, committed himself to learning and then teaching the art of gunmaking. Edmund was fifteen or sixteen years old when he first appeared on a Harpers Ferry arsenal payroll dated February 1822. His job at that time was barrel finisher. Two older brothers appeared on the February payroll along with Edmond and then again on the August 1822 payroll as well -- Singleton Chambers as a "finisher of gun barrels" and William Chambers as a "gun barrel borer"¹ Edmund's brothers may have belonged to a rich tradition of Maryland and Pennsylvania gunsmiths, who, after working as artisans or

¹ Daniel D. Hartzler and James B. Whisker, *The Southern Arsenal : A Study of the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry* (Bedford, PA: Old Bedford Village Press, 1996), 56.

training as apprentices in gunshops in those states, migrated to government jobs in Harpers Ferry.²

Edmund may have learned the art of gunmaking from one or both of his older brothers. By the time he began working at the armory, the formal apprentice system had given way to an inside contracting system based on piece-rate accounting. This new system required the master gun maker to pay his assistants, but it did not obligate him to impart his knowledge or expertise.³ Kinship, on the other hand, played a significant role in the logistics and internal politics of how things got done at the Harpers Ferry armory, and it was not uncommon for the craft to be passed down within families who were interested in creating a legacy.

Even though he literally grew up working at the armory, and was certainly an artisan himself, Edmund did not seem to share the anxieties and misgivings about mechanization that many of his co-workers harbored. In the labor conflict between those who wanted to cling to the craftsman-based system, along with its rights and privileges, and those who wanted to forge a new place for themselves in the increasing mechanization of manufacturing, Edmund supported the latter.

Edmund was an innovator who sought ways to improve his craft. On July 11, 1854, the U.S. Patent Office awarded U.S. Patent No. 11,280 to Washington Spangler, Edmund Hillary Chambers, and William. F. Wilson. These men invented a new way to bore gun barrels, or in the language of the patent, “certain new and useful Improvements in the Construction of Augers and Gimlets.” In their claims, they stated that “the

² Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology: The Challenge of Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 56.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

operation of boring...is rendered easy and certain, by the use of... [our] double cutting, bevel edge, conically twisted augers and gimlets.”

Edmund greatly admired the man perhaps most responsible for changing the arsenal over to mechanized production, Benjamin Moor, master armorer from 1830-1850. At the time of Moor’s death in Pittsburgh in 1857, Edmund formed and chaired a committee of forty in Harpers Ferry to honor this gifted man.⁴ Chambers and Moor might have been cut from the same cloth. Moor had begun work as an armorer at the age of fourteen in the Springfield, Massachusetts armory, had “come up the hard way,” and had earned his reputation as an expert at his craft. Joseph Barry, a local historian and a contemporary of Moor and Chambers, described Moor as “a fine specimen of the physical man” and claimed that “his mind was on the same scale as his body.”⁵ Furthermore, Moor was likable, easy-going, and an individual of unquestionable integrity, just the sort of man that Edmund might admire.⁶

Politician, Community Leader

Edmund Chambers enthusiastically supported the Whig Party. Newspaper articles in the 1840’s described his partisan activities. A member of the Tippecanoe Club of Harpers Ferry, he was appointed delegate to the Whig convention in Richmond in 1840. He was in excellent company; other delegates included the most wealthy and powerful men in the region.⁷ In March 1841 and April 1842, he was a delegate to a Whig meeting convened in Charlestown to select candidates for the Virginia legislature.

⁴ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 12 May 1857, p3c1.

⁵ Joseph Barry, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry : With Legends of the Surrounding Country* (Martinsburg, WV: Thompson Brothers, 1903; reprint, Harpers Ferry, The Woman's Club, 1994), 44.

⁶ Smith, 278.

⁷ *Virginia Free Press*, 1 October 1840, p3c2.

In the early 1850's, disgruntled armory workers, Whigs and Democrats alike, joined together for the purpose of restoring civilian control over the armory. Back in 1841, in an attempt to boost efficiency and tighten discipline, Congress had passed an act requiring military superintendents at the national armories. Ten years later, many civilian workers found the military control intolerable. Benjamin Moor, angry about being forcibly retired from the armory, entered politics to destroy the military system. A Democrat, Moor was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1850, where he spent two years garnering support for his cause. When Charles James Faulkner, friend and fellow Democrat, was elected to the U.S. House in 1851, Moor and Faulkner formed an alliance to call for an investigation of armory management.⁸

Edmund Chambers opposed military control of the armory, and Moor and Faulkner represented his interests. With the Whig party in disarray after losing the presidential election in 1852, Edmund enthusiastically campaigned for Charles James Faulkner in 1853. In April, Edmund, as Chief Marshal, led a procession through town to the site of a fund raising dinner for the Congressman. Apparently this dinner was a grand and festive event – as even the ladies of Harpers Ferry and Bolivar were invited.⁹ By 1854, Faulkner, reputedly an astute politician, succeeded in overturning the 1841 legislation, and on August 5, President Franklin Pierce signed the bill into law restoring civilian superintendents.

In many cases armory and local politics were indistinguishable from each other. Harpers Ferry was, after all, a company town, economically dependent upon its principal employer, the federal government. This intimate connection between the affairs of the

⁸ Smith, 300.

⁹ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 19 April 1853, p2c3.

town and the armory was challenged in court after Edmund Chambers and four other federal employees were elected magistrates in Jefferson County in 1856. The case centered around conflict of interest, but only one of the magistrates was disqualified. Edmund apparently served out his two year term as a magistrate for District 7.

Churchman, Temperance Crusader

A leader in civic affairs, Edmund was a pillar of the Methodist Episcopal Church and belonged to the Methodist Protestant Church as well. After the Methodist Protestants separated from the national Methodist Episcopal Church in 1830 over a disagreement concerning church governance, a small group of the faithful in Harpers Ferry championed the reform and began worshipping in each other's homes. Three years later, they held their first public meeting as Methodist Protestants. Although Edmund Chambers was not one of the members of this initial group, he chose to belong to both Methodist congregations in town. The newly formed church, assembled by John Duke, who, like Edmund was an armorer and a Whig active in local politics, included many of his closest friends and associates.¹⁰

Edmund Chambers actively spread the word of God by planning and organizing camp meetings. Newspaper notices indicated that Edmund served on the Committees of Arrangements for many camp meetings held over a period of eleven years. One, announced in the *Virginia Free Press* on August 14, 1851, listed Edmund Chambers on the organizing committee for the upcoming Methodist Episcopal Church camp meeting to be held in September. These meetings usually lasted several days and included daily religious services, musical performances, Bible readings, and family-style meals. Those

¹⁰ Ralph H. Lewis, *An Historical Sketch of Camp Hill-Wesley Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia* (Harpers Ferry: Harpers Ferry Historical Association, 1996), 9.

seeking salvation often demonstrated their conversion by frenzied emotional outbursts and “falling down.”

At times the meetings attracted curiosity seekers, skeptics, and hecklers in various stages of intoxication, who disrupted the already potentially overwrought proceedings.¹¹ Edmund and the other committee members, who must have had some prior experience with this problem, posted a stern notice about the proper decorum for the upcoming camp meeting: “To prevent further trouble, we hereby forewarn all persons from bringing articles or provisions, or drink, or merchandise of any kind for sale. The most vigorous and prompt efforts will be made to prevent this disreputable and infamous practice.”¹²

In addition to organizing camp meetings, Edmund served as teacher and superintendent of the Sunday School. Records for the Methodist Episcopal Church in Bolivar indicated that he was Leader of Sunday School Class No. 2. A short news item in the December 22, 1859 issue of the *Virginia Free Press* announced that Edmund H. Chambers had invited the editors of the newspaper to the Sabbath School Exhibition on the day after Christmas. For the benefit of the newspaper’s readers, the reporter noted that in the past these exhibitions had proved “peculiarly interesting.”¹³

Edmund Chambers was a life-long evangelist for temperance, which was almost certainly based on his Methodist beliefs about the evils of alcohol. Although most denominations denounced public drunkenness as sinful, the revivalistic Methodists most adamantly opposed alcohol. Beginning in 1790, the Methodists had adopted increasingly

¹¹ W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 206.

¹² *Virginia Free Press*, 14 August 1851, p3c1.

¹³ *Virginia Free Press*, 22 December 1859, p2c5.

strict rules about the use of spiritous liquors. By 1832, the church advocated total abstinence.¹⁴

The passion for temperance ran in the Chambers family. William Chambers, Edmund's brother, was a founding member of the Harpers Ferry Temperance Society, established in 1831. This group met in the Methodist Meeting House. At the annual meeting in 1836, William was elected President and Edmund was appointed to the Executive Committee.¹⁵

By 1840 the Temperance Society had become the Total Abstinence Society. This group commissioned a committee of five, which included William Chambers, to report on the consumption and cost of spiritous liquors in Harpers Ferry during the period July 4, 1840 to July 4, 1841. In their report published in October 1841, the committee presented the main finding as a “mortifying fact,” namely that “in a village of 2500 inhabitants 39,567 gallons of spiritous liquors are vended, and \$73,188.00 actually expended in the trade which is equal to nearly 16 gallons and 29.50 per individual young and old!” While the committee acknowledged that part of this consumption was due to “travel, trade and foreigners,” they sounded a note of despair for their village: “The tide is overwhelming – like angry torrents dashing from a thousand hills, sweeping every thing along its impetuous course and threatening the desolations of every virtuous and honorable sentiment that ornaments human society.”¹⁶

The Total Abstinence Society responded to this threat by bringing out the bands. A November 1841 newspaper article gave details about a temperance procession complete with brass band. Edmund Chambers was one of the organizers of this

¹⁴ Rorabaugh, 207.

¹⁵ *Virginia Free Press*, 12 May 1836, p3c4.

¹⁶ *Virginia Free Press*, 4 November 1841, p1c7.

demonstration against drinking, with marchers from three different abstinence societies in Harpers Ferry.¹⁷ Eight months later, on July 4, 1842, Independence Day, these same abstinence societies participated in another procession arranged by Edmund and others.¹⁸

In 1847, Brother E. H. Chambers, Chairman of the Building Committee, officiated at the dedication of a new hall for the St. Thomas Division of the Sons of Temperance. According to the newspaper article, about three hundred people from temperance societies throughout the region, including one division from Frederick, Maryland, processed from the new hall to the Methodist Episcopal Church, where a service was held. After the service, they marched back to the hall by way of the Island Bridge, accompanied by flying banners and the music of the Harpers Ferry band. The article noted that the Harpers Ferry Sons of Temperance were “doing a vast deal of good.” It concluded with a sentiment Edmund likely shared: “The monster, Intemperance, may yet be banished from the land, and our Nation made to rejoice at its deliverance from this curse to society, and great moral, social and political evil.”¹⁹

Family Man

Perhaps Edmund’s crusade against the monster, Intemperance, was fueled, in part, by his love of family. Nineteenth century temperance leaders preached that a man’s abuse of alcohol posed a threat to his family, and Edmund, a devoted husband and father, may have sympathized with the economically dependent women and innocent children who were its victims.

Edmund, above all, seemed to value his family. Actually, Edmund had two families. He began his first family at about age nineteen, when, having already been

¹⁷ Ibid., 11 November, p2c2.

¹⁸ *Virginia Free Press*, 30 June 1842, p3c4.

¹⁹ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 20 August 1847, p2c4.

employed for four or five years, he courted and won a woman four years his senior. In marrying Eliza Wentzell, he joined a family whose ancestors may have been among the original settlers in Jefferson County. Although younger than his wife, Edmund apparently assumed the role of spiritual leader. After their marriage, Eliza converted to Edmund's Methodist Episcopal faith at a camp meeting in Loudoun County.²⁰

When Eliza died in 1838 at the age of thirty-five, Edmund became a single parent with four children. A year after Eliza's death, Edmund married Mary Miller, a young woman of good family, thirteen years younger than he. Edmund and Mary were married in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on May 28, 1839 by the Reverend John A. Henning, the Methodist Episcopal minister who also had conducted the funeral of Eliza Chambers. At the time of their marriage, Edmund had been employed for seventeen years at the U.S. Armory and Arsenal in Harpers Ferry, where he smooth bored and straightened gun barrels.²¹

By 1848, Mary had borne four children. Edmund Binns Chambers was born in 1840 and Jennie in 1844. Two other children, John Forrist and Eliza Othaniel, died in infancy.

Buena Vista

Two months after Eliza Othaniel died, Edmund Chambers made the biggest purchase of this life. In March 1848, he purchased a tract of approximately fifty and one-half acres of land at public auction from George W. Sappington, William Lucas, and Isaac Fouke. This land overlooked the Shenandoah River on Bolivar Heights. Edmund

²⁰ *Virginia Free Press*, 21 June 1838, p3c4.

²¹ Hartzler and Whisker, 56.

called the property “Buena Vista,” paying tribute to his new home’s spectacularly beautiful view.

The name “Buena Vista” also may have incorporated reference to Harpers Ferry’s recent and proud past. In the recently concluded Mexican War, the 1847 Battle of Buena Vista represented a decisive victory for the United States. The patriotic and loyal Edmund may have wanted to honor the men from Harpers Ferry who had done their part in the Mexican War. To aid in the war effort, Major John Symington, Superintendent of the armory, recruited an elite company to serve in Mexico, accepting only the bravest, brightest, and best for duty. This company very likely had a large number of armorers in its ranks, although no record remains regarding their service.²²

The decision to purchase Buena Vista may have provided Edmund and Mary some relief from their grief over baby Eliza’s death. The investment in a new home, made during a time of mourning, seemed to signify resolve to move ahead, along with hope and confidence in the future of the family and Harpers Ferry.

Edmund built a one and one-half story house, a stable, a granary, and several out buildings on the property and enclosed it all with a fence and a gate. He farmed, growing wheat, hay, and corn. He also grew apples and kept bees for honey. After Edmund and Mary moved to Buena Vista, they added three more daughters to their family. Edmund and Mary may have felt God was smiling upon them, more than amply rewarding them for their faith in the future. In 1849, Julia was born, followed by Mattie in 1852, and Kate in 1856.

²² Millard Kessler Bushong, *Historic Jefferson County* (Boyce, VA: Carr Publishing Co., 1972), 132.

A Mother's Vision: The Importance of Intelligence to Girls

Jennie's mother, Mary Miller Chambers, tread more lightly than her husband through the history of Harpers Ferry. A few letters, an essay, and newspaper notices of her marriage and death attest to her life as daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Born in Washington County, Maryland, Mary was the daughter of Peter and Mary Miller. She had four brothers and two sisters. At some point, perhaps when she and her sisters started school, the Millers moved to Harpers Ferry.

Mary's mother believed in the value of education for women. Mary's older brother, probably Jacob, praised their mother's efforts to educate her three daughters. In an 1838 letter written from Frederick, Maryland to his two sisters, Mary and Lydia, he reminded them: "She did all in her power, and indeed was exceedingly anxious that her children should become intelligent. This I know by what she used to tell me, and it is also evident from her raising the money by her own exertions to enable her to place you and Sally [their other sister] under the tuition of Mr. and Mrs. Dodd at Harpers Ferry...."

Their father, Peter, was less committed to the education of his daughters. The brother summed up his father's feelings on the subject: "He thinks it important that boys should have a good education, but if Girls can do housework it is sufficient." In keeping with the wishes of their mother, son Jacob "frequently urged upon him [their father] the importance of intelligence to Girls," but he noted that while the older man "never expressly dissented, he always seemed careless about it."

The purpose of the brother's letter was to exhort his sisters to continue their studies out of respect for their deceased mother, "in reverence for her whose loss we have all so severely felt." By pursuing their studies, they might raise themselves above the

backwater of Harpers Ferry “where the hills around echoed with the voice of vulgarity, pollution, and profanity.” He found it particularly unfortunate that, after receiving a decent general education, his sisters had to put aside their books “to assist a Good and Affectionate Mother in the performance of the duties of a large family.” He regretted that as women they were expected to engage “in labor which almost amounted to drudgery” with very little time left over “to devote to the perusal of books.”

He wrote about the joy he felt when conversing with the intelligent women of Frederick and about how strongly he wished his sisters were like them, adding with dramatic emphasis: “I would be willing to dwell six months in a desert clothed in saccoth [sic] to obtain such a prize.” Jacob was astute enough to address any apprehensions his sisters or their father may have felt about the presumed liability of too much intelligence in young girls by prescribing a very specific course of study. By basing their studies on “the perusal of books,” he suggested, they might hone their grammar and perfect their writing.

In the course of pursuing their studies, he warned against conversing with those less intelligent than they -- for “to converse with people more ignorant than yourselves will do more harm than good.” A loving brother who was interested in helping his sisters better themselves, he generously offered his assistance by affording them an opportunity to travel to see the world. Interestingly, he must have believed his advice to be subversive, at least within his family, because he concluded with the admonition to “keep this letter secret among yourselves.”²³

The sisters were to do exactly as their brother asked. They kept the letter – it was the oldest in the Chambers manuscript collection, predating all other correspondence by

²³ [Jacob Miller], Frederick, MD, to Mary Miller and Lydia Miller, Harpers Ferry, WV, 20 May 1838.

fifteen years. More importantly, at least for Mary and for her daughters, she kept faith with its urgings. While Jacob's advice arrived a bit too late for Mary to advance her own education, it seemed to serve as a treatise that both influenced her and reflected her own feelings on the value of educating her daughters.

When Mary Miller received this letter from her brother, continuing her own studies was not an option. Mary was eighteen years old and on the verge of marrying Edmund Chambers, a man thirteen years her senior. Chambers had four children from his first marriage, so after their wedding in 1839, Mary became an instant mother. Only seven years older than Edmund's oldest daughter, Mary clearly had her work cut out for her. Within a year, Edmund Binns Chambers, the first of her own five children, was born. She had little time to read and write, and when she did, it was rare and difficult, and she felt apologetic about her penmanship and her prose. In a letter to daughter Jennie, she wrote: "I expect your will make fun of my letter it is written so badly and the paper is bad."²⁴

Mary lived her life in the traditional woman's way of her time. Mary appeared to be a devoted wife to Edmund, a devoted mother to her nine children, and a devoted child of God. She encouraged her daughters to be pious, to be thankful for God's blessings, and to do their duty. For Mary, one's time on earth was a precious gift, and as such, it was not to be squandered. In an essay entitled "The Dying Year," Mary exhorted her readers to lead lives of usefulness and service to others. If, upon reflection on the passing

²⁴ Mary Chambers, Bridesburg, PA, to Jennie Chambers, 21 July 1864.

year, one regretted one's conduct in any way, the antidote was service to others and lots of it, "as much service as is in their power."²⁵

Letters written by her daughters' friends revealed their warm feelings for Mary, often repeating that they loved Mary as they did their own mothers. One of Jennie's friends, Arnold S. Yantis, described Mary as "a good woman in the loftiest sense, a Christian whose faith was melded into her daily life and character, and a mother who reproduced the best ideals of that relation..." In the community of Harpers Ferry, he observed, "her gentle spirit was a constant influence for good."²⁶

A maternal woman, she tenderly mourned her two babies who died in infancy, but she also found comfort in her faith. The obituary published in 1848 for daughter Eliza Othaniel, dead at six weeks and five days, included a poem. This poem expressed Mary's and Edmond's sorrow for the loss of their innocent daughter, alluding as well to their son, who had died three years earlier. It echoed their faith in a more perfect life after death: "Home to thy brother, little one! / This world hath strife and care / Too grievous for a thing so soft / And trial as thou to bear." The refrain repeated the comforting word "home," perhaps reflecting their hope in a heavenly reunion: "Home to the grave ! a sacred home / For those who shrink from guilt to come."²⁷

Recognizing the gaps in her own education, and respecting her mother's and brother's belief in the importance of intelligence to girls, Mary seemed determined to widen the horizon for her daughters. She sent each of them to a private academy. In the article "What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," Jennie referred to her school as

²⁵ Mary Chambers, "The Dying Year, 1861." (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

²⁶ Arnold S. Yantis, Fort Plain, NY, to Jennie Chambers, Harpers Ferry, WV, 5 May 1902.

²⁷ *Virginia Free Press*, 22 January 1848, p3c5.

the Young Ladies Seminary. This school may have been the successor to the one her mother and aunts attended, which in their day had been operated by Mr. and Mrs. Dodd. In 1841, an advertisement in the *Virginia Free Press* indicated that the Male and Female Seminary was under the direction of Thomas J. Dodd. In September 1844, Thomas D. Hoover published a series of notices in the *Spirit of Jefferson*, announcing the third term of the Harpers Ferry Male and Female Seminary. Perhaps Mr. Hoover's school had been renamed the "Young Ladies'" Seminary by 1859.

The Harpers Ferry Male and Female Seminary met in the basement of the Presbyterian Church and offered "the usual studies in an English education, viz: Spelling, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography, Grammar, Natural, Mental, and Moral Philosophy, Chemistry, Natural History, Astronomy, Algebra, Geometry, &c." Mr. Hoover added that "Latin and Greek will be taught in connection with English studies." Noting that the number of scholars would be limited, Mr. Hoover pledged to do all he could for the advancement of his pupils.²⁸

Mary's four daughters, three of whom never married, appeared to benefit from her advocacy. They grew up to become accomplished women. Jennie wrote for publication, sold her paintings, and held leadership positions in local organizations. Mattie, along with her mother, managed the household and was a local correspondent to the Washington Post. Kate taught school for most of her adult life. Julia, acted in local dramatic entertainments, held office in various associations, married, had three sons, and helped her husband operate a clothing store in Leesburg, Virginia. When her husband, Clifton Littlejohn, died at age forty-six, Julia sold the store and raised the boys on her own, eventually moving back to Harpers Ferry.

²⁸ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 20 September 1844, p1c1.

Mary gave her daughters the educational foundation to follow their father as an example and apostle of improvement. Jennie, more than her sisters, mirrored her father's passions, but, as she grew older, she had to find other ways to fulfill them. Her father and brother and every other man of her era had a freedom of movement that she, as a woman who fully accepted her feminine role, could not share. She would have to find different outlets for the intelligence she acquired and the independence she valued. In the years ahead, she did.

Harpers Ferry: Armory Town, Edenic Site

The Harpers Ferry of Jennie's youth was a prosperous, bustling town located in a landscape of great natural beauty. For the most part, its citizens had the best of both worlds – the amenities and stimulation of living in town, alongside the beauty and serenity of nature. At times the two would clash, particularly when foul weather took center stage. Throughout the nineteenth century, floods and other weather-related disasters plagued the town. Even these weather events had their positive aspects, however. In the face of natural disaster, people forgot their normal differences with each other as they collectively mourned their dead and pulled together to recover and rebuild. Joseph Barry, town historian, who lived through many a natural disaster, cheerfully noted that although the Shenandoah River had occasional “spells” of perversity, “when she **does** take a tantrum she makes things lively around her.”²⁹

Prior to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the development of the United States Armory and Arsenal, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and the Winchester and Potomac Railroad brought people and commerce to Harpers Ferry. Excellent turnpikes and stages further connected Harpers Ferry to the

²⁹ Barry, 7.

outside world. The largest employer, the U.S. Armory, continued to grow. By 1854, a nine-year reconstruction of the armory was completed, transforming the physical plant with the addition of twenty-five new structures and a completely rebuilt waterworks. In 1859, the armory employed over 250 production workers, manufacturing close to 9,000 muskets and rifles per year.³⁰

Private industry also flourished. Industries on Virginius Island, a small island in the Shenandoah River adjacent to the town and a center of private manufacturing supported by its own waterworks, produced flour, lumber, cast iron items, machinery parts, and cotton. After the demise of the monopoly on prime commercial real estate held by the Wager family, who were descendents of town founder, Robert Harper, the town's business district, known as Lower Town, grew and diversified. By the mid-1850's Lower Town included over forty shops.³¹ Six churches ministered to the spiritual needs of their congregations. Dynamic temperance societies contributed to a progressive work ethic. Families sent their children to either public or private schools. Three newspapers reported on events in the region. By 1859, a successful library, established by the Library Society of Harpers Ferry, had already been serving its patrons for over thirty years.³²

According to the census of 1850, Harpers Ferry was the largest town in Jefferson County with 1,747 residents, 267 dwelling houses, and 270 families. Bolivar, the township just up the hill, numbered 1,054 residents, 197 dwelling houses, and 279

³⁰ Smith, 344-345.

³¹ Susan E. Winter, "Social Dynamics and Structure in Lower Town Harpers Ferry," *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 4 (1994): 17.

³² Bushong, 125.

families. Taken together, the immediate vicinity supported a population of 2,801 -- 2,647 free and 154 slaves. Bolivar had doubled in population over the preceding decade.

Describing the town on the eve of John Brown's raid in an interview conducted years later, Thomas Allstadt, one of Jennie's closest neighbors, and one of John Brown's hostages, remembered the town this way:

Harpers Ferry was a dandy town in those days. The government had an armory there. You'd see the fountains all along the streets, and flower beds with men tendin' 'em and no expense was spared to make everything attractive.

The situation was beautiful, too. At the lower end of the town the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers met and went on through a gap in the Blue Ridge mountains. The ground between the two rivers was rough and hilly, and most of the buildings huddled along the streams. Each of the rivers had a bridge across it. The Potomac bridge served both for the highway and the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. Near the town end of it was the depot and a hotel high up on the bank where the rivers met.

The railroad kep' on close beside the Potomac on a trustle, and back of the trustle was a long, narrow strip of land that the armory building occupied. A small brick fire engine house stood in the armory yard not far from the depot. The yard gate was close by, and across the street was the arsenal, and beyond that, right by the Shenandoah river, was a railroad that went down to Winchester.

The town had as many as 4000 inhabitants, and nearly 1500 worked for the government. The finest kind of shops had been put up for gun-makin', and dude fellers worked in 'em. They could earn as high as \$4 or \$5 a day at piecework. Yes, Harpers Ferry was a busy, prosperous place, but John Brown put a curse on it. The town went down from the time of his raid, and the war followed soon afterward and just tore up everything.³³

Allstadt was an adolescent boy at the time of Brown's raid, and he may have exaggerated both the town's population and its virtues. On the other hand, he might not have been that far off. While he added approximately 1,200 inhabitants to the number reported in the 1850 census for the combined populations of adjacent Bolivar and

³³ Thomas Allstadt, "The Capture of John Brown: Harpers Ferry Prisoner Taken in John Brown's Raid Gives Personal Experience: Intimate Story of the Stirring Days in October, 1859, Interview collected by Clifton Johnson, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Harpers Ferry, it was possible that the “metropolitan area” had grown that much in nine years. Bolivar’s population had doubled between 1840 and 1850. If it had continued to grow at the same rate, Allstadt’s numbers were precisely correct.

Thomas Allstadt’s description fully incorporated the duality of Harpers Ferry. To Thomas, the “dandy town” was at once “a busy, prosperous place” and “the situation was beautiful too.” Many, many writers have praised the scenery. Located in Jefferson County, Virginia, in the Lower Shenandoah Valley, at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, partially surrounded by mountains, its grandeur stirred Thomas Jefferson to declare the “scene to be worth a voyage across the Atlantic.”³⁴ J. E. Norris, in his *History of the Lower Shenandoah Valley*, pronounced the place unique, in that “there is, possibly, no spot on the American continent where the scenery is so perfectly charming and overwhelming.” Norris praised the unique quality of Harpers Ferry, the accessibility of its beauty:

One can take in these charms and understand them....The gorge through which bursts the combined waters of the majestic Potomac—“river of swans,” and the beautiful Shenandoah – “dancing daughter of the stars,” seems so near, whilst standing on Bolivar Heights, Jefferson’s Rock, or the Maryland Heights, that one can reach out and touch them. A combination of mountain and stream exists in such close proximity, the one rising abruptly from the other, that it is difficult to conclude in one’s mind whether the waters cut their way through the hills or whether the hills failed to grow where the waters ran. To stand upon the heights and watch the glinting of the waters as they dash against the half-embedded rocks of the rivers, and to see the soaring eagle sail from his eyrie on the Loudoun crags and swoops down upon a wild kid on the Maryland Heights, is long to be remembered....³⁵

³⁴ Bushong, 5.

³⁵ J. E. Norris, *History of the Lower Shenandoah Valley: Counties of Frederick, Berkeley, Jefferson and Clarke* (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., 1890), 422-423.

Under Siege

Natural beauty aside, it was another key feature of the town's geography that drove the events of October 16, 1859 and beyond. On that evening, close to midnight, John Brown led a raid of twenty-one men on Harpers Ferry. It was an event that would change the country – and forever alter the lives of Jennie Chambers and her family.

John Brown chose to invade Harpers Ferry, located in the northwest corner of Virginia, situated in a border region between North and South, for both strategic and symbolic reasons. Strategically, he hoped to capture the arsenal and to establish a stronghold in the surrounding mountains. From there, he planned to carry the revolution southward, launching a full-scale servile insurrection in every slaveholding state. Also, from this mountain stronghold, Brown would be close enough to his Northern abolitionist supporters to get more money and supplies when he needed them.

Symbolically, Brown believed that to capture Harpers Ferry, in the venerable State of Virginia, was to reclaim holy ground. Virginia, the birthplace of many of the founding fathers, was in 1859 the spiritual home of the slaveholding South. Home of George Washington, the father of the country and the commanding general of the War of Independence, Virginia had contributed men, talent, and spirit in the fight to establish the principles that all men were created equal and possessed certain unalienable Rights. The institution of slavery had perverted the promise of those ideals. What better place, then, than Virginia to begin the second American Revolution, a war to be fought by black men and white men for the freedom, for the “Life, Liberty, and pursuit of Happiness,” promised by the first?

On the morning of October 17, 1859, as Jennie Chambers crested the hill toward town on her way to school, she became an eyewitness to John Brown's raid. From the hill, it looked like chaos -- the riding, the shouting, the brandishing, the yelling, and the firing. As she later recalled her reaction to the sight, she wrote, "my heart stopped beating and I dropped my books." Her adrenalin flowed. She ran toward home. Once she reached the farm on Bolivar Heights, her determination superceded her fear. She stood her ground, ready to protect her home. Describing this day's import to her life, she wrote later, "There has never been for me a day like that of October 17, 1859."³⁶

For Jennie, the raid on Harpers Ferry began with betrayal from within. The people of Harpers Ferry had trusted Brown and his associates, those strangers in their midst, and had taken them at their word, but the invaders had lived in disguise among them. Of a man she identified as Mr. Cook, Jennie wrote, "Now we all knew Mr. Cook, and we liked him; we couldn't think how he got into this."³⁷

Town historian Joseph Barry, whose account of John Brown's raid was contemporaneous with Jennie's, also wrote about betrayal. John Edwin Cook had lived and worked among the people of Harpers Ferry for a year and had married a local girl. He had taught school for a time and had been hospitably welcomed into the home of one of Harpers Ferry's most prominent citizens, Colonel Lewis Washington, grand-nephew of George. Cook, in a most base betrayal, had used his visits as an opportunity to gather intelligence for the subsequent kidnapping of his host.³⁸

³⁶ Jennie Chambers, "What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 104 (1902): 311.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 312.

³⁸ Barry, 88.

Another of Brown's men, Mr. Stevens, was quite handsome with "very dark and bright" eyes. Jennie wrote: "...and all of us school-girls knew Mr. Stevens. He often called out to us as we went by his boarding-house in Harpers Ferry, and when his landlady used to treat the girls to pickles, he would tell her not to do it, as it was bad for our health."³⁹ Joseph Barry presented a more sinister picture of Aaron D. Stevens. People later learned that this man, the one Jennie believed had been so concerned with the girls' health, had suggested to Brown that they kill the prisoners and set fire to the town. Referring to Stevens, Barry believed "that there was greater animosity felt towards him than any of the others, except, perhaps, Captain Brown himself and Cook."⁴⁰

According to Jennie, Brown, known to her as Mr. John Smith, had lived with his two daughters at the Kennedy farmhouse, located across the Potomac River on the Antietam road in Maryland. The Smiths, who lived in "that lonely place," were "quiet, unpretentious people, who had little to say to their neighbors, and that only for their good." Mr. Hoffmaster, an acquaintance of Jennie's family, lived next door to the Kennedy farm. He maintained that Smith "was a good neighbor and a good preacher too." Jennie, believing second hand reports that Smith had "preached a fine sermon" in the Dunker Church "not an hour before the raid began," was astounded by such audacious duplicity. She was amazed "that instead of being John Smith, this preacher was no other than John Brown, the Abolitionist!"⁴¹ [Note: Stephen B. Oates, in *To Purge This Land With Blood* (1970), and David S. Reynolds, in *John Brown, Abolitionist* (2005), biographers of John Brown, differed from Jennie in some particulars. They reported John Brown was known in Maryland and Virginia as Mr. Isaac Smith, rather

³⁹ Chambers, "What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," 312.

⁴⁰ Barry, 76.

⁴¹ Chambers, "What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," 312, 313.

than as Mr. John Smith. Reynolds mentioned the snooping Huffmaster family (Jennie spelled the name Hoffmaster) and their proximity to the Kennedy farm; Oates described such a family but does not name them. Both authors noted Brown's connection with the nearby Dunker Church. Reynolds reported that Brown attended services there and sometimes preached. Neither biographer claimed Brown preached a sermon there on the night of the Harpers Ferry invasion.]

In Jennie's account, her father, Edmund Chambers, was a hero, coming to the defense of the town. After she had run back to the house to warn her mother about the invasion, she realized with dismay her father had gone to town to investigate. Fearfully, she "began to cry." Relief came when a crowd of men came up the Pike from the Ferry, and "I recognized father at the head of them." She took care to note that the company of eighty men respectfully addressed her father as "Lieutenant Chambers." The men then divided into four squads and marched down the hill. Three surrounded Harpers Ferry, and one, made up of Captain Aris, Lieutenant Chambers and other respected citizens, such as Richard Washington "(brother of Colonel Lewis, the captive)," bravely headed "straight for the arsenal," the heart of the action. The next day, in the face of rumors of a second wave of abolitionist attacks, her father led a scouting party to search for hidden arms.⁴²

Despite John Brown's goal of arousing the state's slaves to insurrection, Jennie's recollection was that her father showed compassion for the slaves he knew. Sometime after the raid, he found several slaves congregated on the turnpike above the Chambers farm. They were meeting without the knowledge of their owners, but her father did not retaliate. On the contrary, Edmund Chambers "went up to them and advised them to go

⁴² Ibid.: 312, 314.

to their homes, as they would surely be discovered and arrested.” To a post-war audience, she made her father’s sentiment about slavery quite clear: “Father was himself opposed to slavery.”⁴³

Rumors fueled the excitement. The townspeople of Harpers Ferry and others in the surrounding area feared further attacks from abolitionists and slaves. Historian Barry wrote about how, on Wednesday night, October 19, 1859, all the people living in Sandy Hook evacuated the town in a panic after a Pleasant Valley man rode furiously through the town with the news that abolitionists and slaves were butchering people around Rohrsville, a few miles up the valley. The people gathered the belongings they could carry and rushed to the protection of Harpers Ferry where some troops remained. This unexpected influx of frightened families ignited panic among Harpers Ferrians.⁴⁴ Jennie’s uncle, Jacob Miller, and his large family, may have been among the panicked refugees.

Federal soldiers rushed to Rohrsville to put down the uprising, but they found no evidence of the reported massacre. Jennie gave one explanation for this false alarm, her attempt to set the record straight. On Tuesday, her father and a scouting party had been sent out from Harpers Ferry to search for hidden arms. Apparently the Pleasant Valley farmer who saw the armed men coming down the Valley mistook them for abolitionists and, panicking, initiated the false alarm. Fifteen year old Jennie, along with other women and children and the Maryland families they were sheltering, spent “a night of terror” in a church cellar. She believed that only those who lived through it could fully comprehend

⁴³ Ibid.: 318.

⁴⁴ Barry, 66.

the horror of it: “All night long the men of the town waited in terrible suspense, the women and children crying and screaming.”⁴⁵

The citizens of Harpers Ferry had every reason to believe they were under siege. The rumors persisted and kept the locals in a state of dread and panic. Joseph Barry wrote that for weeks many alarms similar to the one of October 19, 1859 “were started by nervous or mischievous people with nearly the same results.” A series of unexplained fires destroyed barns across the countryside.⁴⁶

After Brown and his men were captured and transported to Charlestown for trial, a small garrison of U.S. troops stayed behind to guard the town and the armory. As the date of John Brown’s execution approached, word circulated that abolitionists would attempt a rescue. Until Brown’s execution on December 2, 1859, groups of citizens patrolled the streets every night to watch out for “prowling abolitionists.”⁴⁷ Several companies of armorers formed their own force for the defense of the place, and Edmund Chambers was likely among them. Once a week, the armorers paraded through town displaying “all the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war.”⁴⁸

Everyone Had Stories to Tell

After the initial shock of the violence had subsided, everyone had stories to tell. Jennie learned the details about slave Phil Luckum’s imprisonment and demise from Mr. Allstadt, Phil’s owner, and one of the Chambers’ closest neighbors. Mr. Allstadt, a well-to-do planter and slaveholder, lived up the Pike from Jennie’s family. Immediately after Brown’s men captured Colonel Lewis Washington and his slaves, they took Mr. Allstadt

⁴⁵ Chambers, “What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown’s Raid,” 318.

⁴⁶ Barry, 67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

and two of his slaves hostage. They also took Thomas, Mr. Allstadt's seventeen year old son, with them.

Thomas Allstadt told an interviewer his story of the abduction many years after the event. In this interview, Thomas described how he had confronted the two intruders with youthful bravado. He demanded to know what they were going to do. In spite of his mother's attempts to keep him quiet, Thomas challenged Mr. Stevens: "I talked back to him right smart, and I was a little sassy, for I was on my own ground." Then Stevens announced that Captain Brown had taken the governments works at Harpers Ferry. Thomas remembered this exchange between them:

"That wasn't much to do, I said. "They only have one watchman there."
 "You shut your mouth or I'll blow your brains out," he said.

Apparently, Thomas began to have some regrets about his risky behavior, as he explained: "Then the colored feller collared me and drawed a revolver and held it ag'in my breast. That made me kind o' nervous. I couldn't do nothin', and I said to myself, 'You've got me now.'" And, indeed, they did have him. They forced Thomas and his father and their slaves into a wagon with Colonel Washington's slaves and headed for town.

Thomas was held in the engine house, and he saw a great deal of bloodshed as men were killed or wounded in the battle. He understood that he was a human shield being used protect Brown and his men. He saw his father's slave, Phil Luckum, get caught in the crossfire, collapse, and die. He witnessed Watson Brown's terrible suffering as he lay dying, the son begging his father to kill him to put an end to his misery. He heard John Brown tell Watson to "die like a man." That Monday night,

October 17, 1859, was for Thomas “the longest night I ever spent.” Thomas and Jennie each experienced their own “night of terror” during Brown’s raid.

One may imagine that Thomas’ story made a deep impression on Jennie. Thomas was the slightly older boy next door, the son of a wealthy man. He and Jennie may have attended the same church, as Thomas described going to a “protracted meetin’” at the Harpers Ferry Methodist church on the Sunday evening of John Brown’s raid. Thomas’ fate might have befallen her if the raiders had continued down the road, gathering more hostages. She may have thought – There, but for the Grace of God, go I.

At any rate, Jennie almost certainly heard his story, probably more than once. In his interview, Thomas indicated that he had told his story many times: “The people liked to have talked me to death. ‘Hyar, tell me how you was arrested and all about it,’ they’d say. They kep’ at me and would hardly let me away.” The town was abuzz with its stories.⁴⁹

Stand Against Secession

During the early months of 1861, Jennie had seen her father make his stand against secession. Edmund Chambers had supported the two pro-Union delegates elected to represent Jefferson County at the Virginia Convention beginning in February. One of the men, Alfred M. Barbour of Harpers Ferry, was Armory superintendent. As the convention dragged on into weeks then months, Barbour, despite the pledge made to constituents to support the Union, gave in to political pressure and pro-secessionist lobbying by family and friends.

Before Virginia passed the secession ordinance, former Governor Henry Wise, along with Barbour and a few others, made plans to seize the Harpers Ferry arsenal for

⁴⁹ Allstadt.

the state. Ironically, Wise had first become aware of the value of the arsenal during John Brown's raid, and he, as well as the rest of the men, had been present at Brown's execution for attempting the same tactic eighteen months earlier.⁵⁰ On the night of April 16th, 1861, Wise convened the secessionist conspirators in his hotel room to finalize plans and to put them in motion.

Skipping the final vote in Richmond, Barbour returned to Harpers Ferry by train to rally the armorers to the Confederate cause. Meanwhile, the Richmond convention secretly passed the secession ordinance late in the afternoon of April 17th. They were aided in their decision by former Governor Wise, who brought a loaded gun to the proceedings.

As rumor reached Harpers Ferry that Virginia would withdraw from the union, Edmund Chambers took action to prevent the secessionists from capturing the arsenal's fifteen to seventeen thousand guns. He and two other armory workers, John McClennan and William Wilson, took the night train to Washington, D.C. to warn Chief of Ordnance Colonel Henry K. Craig and Secretary of War Simon Cameron about the threat to the arsenal. Colonel Craig sent Captain Charles Kingsbury to replace Barbour as superintendent, and the four men travelled together to Harpers Ferry on the morning of April 18th.

On that same morning, Superintendent Barbour called a meeting of the armory employees and urged them to support their native state and to pledge their allegiance to the new order of things. He promised high wages to anyone who would remain and work for the state.

⁵⁰ Chester G. Hearn, *Six Years of Hell : Harpers Ferry During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 50.

The loyalists were furious. They shouted the superintendent down, accusing him of treason. Fistfights broke out between secessionists and union men. When John Burk, a young man who had been guarding the telegraph office appeared on the street wearing a gray uniform, a near riot ensued.⁵¹ Looking back on that day of “wildest excitement,” Joseph Barry summed it up this way: “To use a homely phrase, Harpers Ferry was between hawk and buzzard, a condition in which it remained ‘till the war was ended four years afterwards.’”⁵²

As Lieutenant of the Armory Guards, Edmund Chambers volunteered to defend the armory. Captain Kingsbury, the new armory superintendent, stationed Chambers and twenty-five men at the Rifle Works, located some distance away from the main government buildings, and took the remaining guards to serve as pickets elsewhere.

First Lieutenant Roger Jones, who had been sent to Harpers Ferry the previous year to guard the armory from attack, commanded a small company of regulars. At 9:00 in the evening on April 18th, Jones wired Washington for reinforcements, but when the first of the Virginia militia appeared on Bolivar Heights at 10:00 p.m., Jones and his men set fire to both the armory and the arsenal to destroy the machinery and the fifteen thousand muskets stored there. Without signalling to the Armory Guards or to other volunteers of their retreat, Jones and his men crossed the Potomac bridge with an angry mob of secessionists on their heels. As historian Barry noted, “this left the volunteers in a very awkward position.”⁵³

Chambers maintained his watch at the Rifle Works until Virginia militia Colonel Turner Ashby demanded a surrender. Edmund’s account gave the time to be between

⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

⁵² Barry, 98.

⁵³ Ibid.

midnight and 1:00 a.m. Mary Chambers related that her husband demanded to know Ashby's authority, to which the Colonel answered, "In the name of the Confederate States of America." Edmund responded, "I recognize no such government and hold this Armory in the United States of America." At this point, Edmund was holding the building with only his son and three other men. Realizing it would be foolish to remain, Edmund and his men surrendered the property. They were allowed to return to their homes.⁵⁴

The Confederates began an occupation of Harpers Ferry that lasted for two months. They, and the Confederate sympathizers in the town, came down hard on the Union men who had defended the armory. One, an Irishman named Jeremiah Donovan, was almost lynched in the wee hours of April 19th by a mob of angry townspeople, but cooler heads prevailed and he was allowed to move north to seek employment. Mr. George Koonce, "a man of great activity and personal courage," left Harpers Ferry immediately and did not return until federal troops regained control. Several days later, two more prominent citizens of the town, Solomon V. Yantis, a close friend of the Chambers family, and Dr. Joseph E. Cleggett, were nearly lynched for their Union loyalty.⁵⁵

A few days after his defense of the Rifle Works, Edmund Chambers was arrested and charged with treason. Although the Chambers family accounts do not include the date of the arrest, Mary remembered Edmund "was arrested in the morning [and] taken away without his breakfast."⁵⁶ Jennie recalled that a company of Confederates came to

⁵⁴ Mary Chambers, To Whom It May Concern, 31 January 1899, West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.

⁵⁵ Barry, 99.

⁵⁶ Mary Chambers, To Whom It May Concern, 31 January 1899.

their home in Bolivar Heights and arrested her father “in a rough manner.”⁵⁷ He was jailed first in Charlestown, and then taken to Winchester.

At his trial, Edmund Chambers was defended by Andrew Hunter, a well-respected Virginia gentleman who supported the Confederate cause and who was one of the attorneys who had prosecuted John Brown. Edmund’s longtime friendship with Andrew Hunter trumped their opposing loyalties. Hunter convinced the jury that Chambers was not aware of Virginia’s secession at the time of his trip to Washington and his subsequent defense of the armory, and Edmund was acquitted. Hunter’s defense saved Edmund from hanging. In Chambers’ words, if the rebels had proven their case “I suppose they would have swung me up.”⁵⁸

In Harpers Ferry, martial law replaced civil law. The small town of approximately three thousand was sharply divided between those who still supported the federal government, many of whom were armorers, and those who upheld Virginia’s right to secede. The Confederate troops seized all government property, which forced many former federal employees from their rented homes. Normal business ceased, but other industry serving the influx of soldiers thrived, such as pie-baking and whiskey smuggling.⁵⁹

Joseph Barry, a man of decided Union sympathies, wrote about another trade – that of the spy. He described the sad state of affairs as neighbor turned against neighbor: “Malicious and officious people – many of whom are to be found in all communities – stuffed the ears of the hot-headed southern men with tales about “sneaking abolitionists,

⁵⁷ Jennie Chambers, “The Beginning of the War in Harper’s Ferry...” (West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV).

⁵⁸ Edmund Chambers, to General Meigs, Quarter Master General, U.S.A., 24 April 1876, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

⁵⁹ Barry, 101.

black republicans, unconditional union men, &c., and private enmity had an excellent opportunity of gratification, of which villains did not hesitate to avail themselves.” As a result, many “quiet, inoffensive citizens” were hauled off to filthy jails, “a prey to vermin and objects of insult to the rabble that guarded them.”⁶⁰

On June 14th, 1861, a detachment led by Stonewall Jackson completed their final preparations to leave Harpers Ferry. Having already salvaged what they could from the armory and the arsenal, and then shipping what remained to armories in Richmond and Fayetteville, North Carolina, the Confederates burned the remaining government buildings. Ironically, the only armory building left standing was the old engine house, John Brown’s fort. As Jackson’s detachment left town, they blew up the railroad bridge across the Potomac and destroyed the span that connected the Winchester and Potomac to the main line of the Baltimore and Ohio.

The Confederates took Edmund Chambers and three other prominent citizens with them, depositing them in the Winchester jail and charging them with “inveterate unionism.”⁶¹ During Edmund’s incarceration, the authorities attempted to convince the experienced armorer to join some former co-workers who were going to work in Richmond to manufacture guns. He firmly declined the offer, telling them “no, not if they would give me forty dollars per day.”⁶² Through the influence of several men, unnamed, Edmund was eventually released and returned home.

Inveterate Unionists

In early October, Edmund had another opportunity to be of service to the Union. Abraham Herr, who owned the flour mill on Virginius Island, offered twenty thousand

⁶⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁶¹ Ibid., 105. Hearn, 74.

⁶² Edmund Chambers, to General Meigs, Quarter Master General, U.S.A., 24 April 1876.

bushels of wheat to Colonel John White Geary, commander of the 28th Pennsylvania, 13th Massachusetts, and 3rd Wisconsin regiments. Herr, who had voted for the secession ordinance, had changed sides after he was mistakenly arrested as a Unionist by Virginia militia and sent to Richmond for questioning. When Union troops disabled his mill prior to the harvest to prevent it from being used by the Confederates, Herr held no grudge. But when he heard that the Confederates had plans to confiscate his wheat, he invited the Union forces to cross the river to get it.

Union Colonel Geary assigned the task to Major J. Parker Gould, who obtained a barge, floated it up the Shenandoah, and began loading the bushels of wheat. Time was of the essence. Confederate Colonel Turner Ashby, learning of the operation, assembled his troops to claim the grain for the South. The Union troops needed help to accomplish their mission. They conscripted able-bodied citizens and promised a per diem wage, which apparently was never paid.

Historian Joseph Barry was one of the conscripts. Barry wrote amusingly about his “indignation at ... being put to this servile employment” and grumbled about the unfulfilled promise of a liberal per diem, which “like many other promises and intentions, forms a part of the pavement of a certain region where it never freezes.”⁶³ Though not a conscript, Edmund Chambers helped also, and like Barry, felt he ought to have been rewarded for his risks and patriotism. The bill for his services was included in his later war claims.

The last of the grain was loaded onto the barge on October 15th, but Confederate Colonel Ashby was fast approaching from Charlestown. At daybreak on October 16th, 1861, Ashby rushed Bolivar Heights and gunfire erupted. Concerned for the safety of his

⁶³ Barry, 114. Hearn, 84-85.

family, Edmund Chambers sent his wife and daughters, along with some elderly relatives, the Kirbys, to seek shelter in a relative's house under the hill on the Shenandoah River.

Mary Chambers, a few years before she died, described Jennie's bravery that day. On the way to the relative's house, Jennie and her party passed some Union pickets encamped along the river. Jennie entreated them to flee the approaching Confederate cavalry, but the soldiers, ten from the 28th Pennsylvania and three from the 3rd Wisconsin, were hesitant to leave their post without orders. They asked Jennie to signal them if she came upon the Confederates further along the road. As Jennie and the others proceeded to their destination, she caught sight of the advancing Confederate soldiers. She immediately turned and waved a warning to the Union pickets behind her. The next instant a volley of bullets whistled over her head. The pickets returned the fire and fled to Harpers Ferry, where they crossed the Potomac River into Maryland.

Captain Robert W. Baylor, leading the Confederate cavalry, saw Jennie signal the Union pickets at their approach. He and one other member of his company pursued her to the house of some free blacks, where Jennie and her party sought refuge. Jennie confronted them in the doorway. There Captain Baylor took her by the shoulder and held a gun to her breast. He angrily threatened her: "What did you wave at those _____ Yankees for? I'll put you where you will never wave at another Yankee."

By her mother's account, Jennie, who was "at the time very young" and "did not realize her danger," snapped back, "Go farther down and you will have somebody to shoot beside women and children." Captain Baylor let Jennie go, which Mary attributed to his "shame or through answer to my prayer or through a divine providence." Although Jennie escaped the consequences of Captain Baylor's wrath that day, the men in the

house, including her elderly relative, Mr. Meshach Kirby, did not. They were arrested and transported to the Charlestown jail, from which all but Mr. Kirby were sent to Libby prison and confined for fifty-one days.⁶⁴

This incident seemed to mark a watershed moment in Jennie's life. Although Jennie wrote "there has never been for me a day like October 17, 1859," this October day, two years later, must have rivaled it. The previous April Jennie had seen her father make his stand against secession, and she had witnessed many demonstrations of his loyalty to the "old government." He had been arrested and jailed, and once tried for treason. Jennie's admiration for her father, so evident in her account of John Brown's raid, her desire to pay the Confederates back for what they had done to him, an aspiration to be like him, and her youth may have all combined on that day to inspire her to warn the Union pickets. For whatever reasons, she seized upon this opportunity to act upon her convictions. As she raised her arm to wave to the pickets, Confederate bullets whizzed past her head. The fear that she described in her account of John Brown's raid had been replaced by resolve.

After the men were taken prisoner, Mary took her family back home to Bolivar Heights. A sharp skirmish ensued. She wrote that "all day long the firing was kept up." The next day, Jennie's father, responding to a friend's warning concerning his daughter's imminent arrest, hired a man to take Jennie across the river to the safety of her uncle's house in Maryland.⁶⁵

Both sides claimed victory in this skirmish on Bolivar Heights, but neither army remained to hold Harpers Ferry. Union Colonel Geary retreated across the Potomac with

⁶⁴ Mary Chambers, To Whom It May Concern, 31 January 1899.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Mr. Herr's grain, and Confederate Colonel Ashby fell back to Charlestown. The casualty reports were contradictory, but few deaths were reported. Approximately eleven hundred men engaged in battle for four hours, with five dead and twenty wounded. One contemporary historian, Chester G. Hearn, attributed the light casualties to miserable marksmanship. The poor aim of the soldiers greatly increased the risk to the civilians in the vicinity.⁶⁶

After this battle so near her home, Jennie discovered, up close and personal, just how hellish war could be. When Union Colonel Geary recovered his four dead, he found their bodies naked and mutilated. One man's body was left in the form of a crucifixion, his palms cut through with a knife. Geary wrote, "This inhuman treatment incensed my troops exceedingly..."⁶⁷ While Jennie may not have seen the horror of the desecrated bodies with her own eyes, she certainly may have heard the gruesome reports.

Refugee

After Jennie left Harpers Ferry on October 17th to seek refuge at her uncle's home in Maryland, she was forced to remain there all winter. A blockade instituted by Union troops prevented her from seeing or communicating with her family during that time. When she first arrived at Jacob Miller's house, Major Hector Tyndale suspected her of being a rebel spy. Tyndale interviewed Jennie and her uncle to determine the real purpose of her visit. When Uncle Jacob revealed Jennie's daring act to save the Union pickets, Tyndale became satisfied of her loyalty, and he and Jennie became friends.

After Hector Tyndale discovered Jennie's identity, they may have discussed the Battle of Bolivar Heights because both were there. On October 16th, Tyndale led five

⁶⁶ Hearn, 88.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

companies of the 28th Pennsylvania into battle and captured Bolivar Heights. He planted the regimental colors there, perhaps not far from Jennie's home.⁶⁸

Apparently, they discussed the days of John Brown's raid and trial. Tyndale was known to the people of Harpers Ferry as the man who accompanied Brown's wife to the Ferry to await her husband's remains after his execution. Tyndale then conducted Mrs. Brown and the coffin back to New York, where her husband's remains were to be buried at their home near Lake Placid. Major Tyndale told Jennie that, in connection with that duty, he had been offered ten thousand men to help Brown and his raiders escape from jail.⁶⁹

Major Tyndale was in charge of enforcing the Union blockade that prevented Jennie from seeing or hearing from her family in Harpers Ferry. Years later, Jennie wrote about the effect this isolation from her family had upon her: "I was but a young girl then, and the experience of being away from home, and its associations for months, without hearing one word in all that time from home, which was in sight on the Virginia side, made a vivid impression on my mind."⁷⁰ A "good soldier," nevertheless, Jennie kept the following letter from Tyndale among her papers, perhaps to prove that she complied with the Union blockade in "the strict observance of military orders:"

Head Quarters Department, Sandy Hook, Md.
Feb'y 3rd 1862

Miss Chambers

I sincerely regret to say that since I had the pleasure of seeing your uncle to whom a promise was made, as to yourself also, that you should cross over the river, I have received instructions to permit no one to cross. This however

⁶⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁹ Jennie Chambers, "During the Cold Winter of the Blockade..." (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

⁷⁰ Jennie Chambers, "A War Reminiscence," (West Virginia Collection, University of West Virginia, Morgantown, WV).

will not remain in force for any length of time, I trust, and so soon as the prohibition is removed word shall be sent to you. Please make my sincere respects to your uncle, aunt, and cousins, who I had hope to have the pleasure of seeing last week, but having been not at all well, that pleasure is deferred to the future.

Very respectfully your Obedient Servant
Hector Tyndale
Major 28th Regiment P. V. Command'g Post

To Miss Jennie Chambers
Prospect Hill.

A few days after Tyndale wrote the cordial letter above, he led a detachment of men to Harpers Ferry to set fire to the hotel, the Potomac Restaurant, and other buildings near the demolished railroad bridge. Colonel Geary sent Major Tyndale on this mission to avenge the killing of his favorite scout, a Union man from the Ferry named Rohr. Rohr, and another man named Rice, had been gathering intelligence in Lower Town on February 7th. On their return trip across the river to Maryland, Rohr was killed by members of Captain Robert Baylor's patrol.

In connection with Rohr's killing, Historian Hearn noted that Captain Baylor kept a close watch on Jefferson County, taking special interest in Harpers Ferry, and that he "administered depredations on anyone accused of unionism."⁷¹ Captain Baylor meant business. Jennie had faced real danger in her encounter with him.

Indian Summer

In the last days of February 1862, Union General Nathaniel Banks crossed the river on the newly built pontoon bridge and occupied the town with 16,000 troops. The federal soldiers arrived to find a ghost town. In her memoir, *Under Fire*, resident Annie Marmion, a young girl during the winter of 1861-1862 and the daughter of the town's

⁷¹ Hearn, 91.

doctor, wrote, “Imagine a town filled with houses enough to accommodate over 2,000 people and more than nine tenths of them empty.” Historian Barry described the town as a place of “utmost desolation,” from which “all inhabitants had fled.” One of the arriving soldiers, Walter A. Eanes, described Harpers Ferry in a letter to his wife as a “ruined town with its burned and shattered buildings,” but added that before its destruction “it must have been very beautiful.” With the army came reporters and other observers. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne took a dim view of the place, writing, “The brightest sunshine could not have made the scene cheerful, not taken away the gloom from the dilapidated town...it has an inexpressible forlornness.”⁷²

The arrival of 16,000 troops “threw a new life into the town.”⁷³ Many of the residents returned to their homes, often to find them occupied by soldiers and other squatters and devoid of their possessions. A great deal of rebuilding lay ahead, but business began to boom. The new bridge across the Potomac was completed in March, and the two railroads, the Baltimore and Ohio and the Winchester and Potomac, resumed service for passengers and freight. The day after the reopening of the rail lines 3,800 freight cars passed through Harpers Ferry. The Stars and Stripes flew over the new train station. Harpers Ferry, now an armed camp and a supply base for Union operations in the Shenandoah Valley, offered jobs for those willing to take them.⁷⁴ Some citizens “accumulated snug fortunes in providing small luxuries for the wearied soldiers and their friends.”⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid., 90, 93, 94.

⁷³ Barry, 122.

⁷⁴ Hearn, 96.

⁷⁵ Barry, 122.

In April 1862 General Banks began his campaign to drive Stonewall Jackson out of the valley. Jennie, after securing a pass from Major Tyndale, returned to Harpers Ferry in the Spring of 1862 in the company of her Uncle Jacob. They crossed the pontoon bridge with some of Banks' detachments. Years later, Jennie recalled her joy and awe at returning home alongside a large Union army on the move, undertaken "amid all the excitement and terror of the hour." For her, this event became "one of the most thrilling scenes" of the Civil War.

Her sense of anticipation at returning home may have been heightened by the evidence of rebuilding and renewal she encountered on her journey. On the half mile walk from Sandy Hook to the bridge with her uncle, she recalled "walking over and climbing up one high pile of lumber all the way." Perhaps this lumber was left over from the construction of the new bridge across the Potomac, replacing the one blown up the year before by the Confederates as they carted her father off to prison.

Although she did not specify the date of her return to Harpers Ferry, she remembered that "as the army was marching by the side of us in the road, the army was attacked by Stonewall Jackson at Winchester." This attack occurred on May 25th, and Jackson drove Banks into retreat. In his haste to flee, Banks left behind 3,500 men, which was half his force, 9,000 small arms, 2 pieces of artillery, tons of food, herds of cattle and sheep, and according to Jennie, "about two million dollar's worth of medical stores."

Describing her father's reaction to the news, Jennie wrote: "I remembered the anxiety depicted in my father's face when he came into my home and said Banks has been routed by Jackson." As retreating troops began arriving and pitching their tents on

Bolivar Heights, the rain poured in torrents. She recalled the scene this way: "Our home barn and other buildings on the farm were offered as shelter by my father. Every floor in the house with the exception of one room kept for the family was used by the Officers and men. Though disheartened and homesick, they never forgot the courtesy extended to them."⁷⁶

As a young woman, Jennie rubbed elbows with some of the most important military men of her day. She had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of General Banks when he was headquartered at her uncle Jacob's farm during the winter of 1861-1862. She became friends with Major Tyndale. Of Union Colonel Isaac C. Wistar, commanding officer of the 1st California Regiment, who made his headquarters in her home during the retreat, she wrote: "He was reputed to be very wealthy, was very cultured and gentlemanly." Although young, she conscientiously preserved her family's and Harpers Ferry's history. She collected the autographs of the officers who were encamped near her home and placed them in an album.⁷⁷

In late May, when Jackson chased Banks and the Federal troops across the river to Williamsport, Maryland, the Confederates did not enter or occupy Harpers Ferry. Within a few days the Union troops returned. They maintained the town as a base of supplies continuously throughout the rest of the summer. At some point during that period, Union General William H. French made his headquarters at the Chambers' farm. When his family visited him at Harpers Ferry during the summer, the Chambers entertained them as family guests.

⁷⁶ Jennie Chambers, "In April Banks Army Crossed the Potomac at Harper's Ferry..." (West Virginia Collection, University of West Virginia, Morgantown, WV).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Although perhaps starstruck by some of the men, Jennie communicated readily and comfortably with many of them, even those of the highest rank. Jennie was young, female, and inexperienced, but when she was advocating for others, she was savvy, bold, confident, and unintimidated. When three guards from the 1st Delaware, who were assigned to protect the Chambers' house and property, were suddenly reassigned and replaced by others, she did not hesitate to ask the "old General" French for the favor of returning them. The Chambers had treated these fortunate men like family, providing "family fare without cost for weeks" so that the soldiers were spared from eating army rations of hard tack and bacon. Entreating the General to pull strings for the three, "who had been so faithful," she must have been very persuasive. In response to her letter, General French immediately transferred the replacements and granted the return of "the old faithful ones."⁷⁸

Young Jennie referred to William H. French as the "old General," but he was forty-eight years old. A Marylander, like her parents, and a graduate of West Point, he fought in the Seminole and Mexican Wars and had served in the Army of the Potomac since its formation. Historian Chester Hearn described French as a man who "enjoyed a rollicking good time."⁷⁹ To Jennie, he was approachable and kind. He must also have been a good sport. To honor him, Jennie christened her "great pet," a black and tan terrier, "French."

For Jennie, the spring and summer of 1862 must have been exhilarating. She was home at last from her six month exile to Maryland. In her daily life, she came into frequent contact with influential men in authority, in particular those commanding

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Hearn, 221.

officers of the Union army who chose to use her father's farm as their headquarters. She held her own among these important men, and they treated her with respect. Young soldiers clad in blue flooded the town and pitched their tents on her father's farm. She was surrounded by valiant, eligible men, who believed as she did in the Union's cause.

Jennie, just turned eighteen, who by many accounts was a pretty, spirited young woman, slight in stature, with clear blue eyes, may have been the center of attention for many a lonely young man, far from home. From correspondence she received from some of these soldiers years later, we know that they remembered her and her family fondly. At least one such soldier, who guarded her family during the encampment, belatedly confessed his youthful infatuation with her.

Jennie's beloved Harpers Ferry, caught in the gunfire between opposing armies during the bitter winter of 1861-1862, continued to rebound under its occupation by Union troops. In June 1862, U.S. Army Colonel Dixon S. Miles took command of Harpers Ferry. His job was to defend the Ferry and to protect the Baltimore and Ohio line. During the summer, the number of men under his command swelled. New construction resumed. The bridge rebuilt in March had washed out twice in the spring, but crews worked hard in July and August to replace it.

The people of Harpers Ferry had jobs and money again. If the atmosphere was a little bawdier than Edmund Chambers may have preferred, with camp followers plying their trade and the availability of bootlegged whiskey reaching new heights, Jennie may have welcomed the excitement and the worldliness of it all.

Torn to Pieces

But Confederate General Robert E. Lee had other plans for Harpers Ferry. After Second Manassas, Lee wanted to invade Maryland, believing that Marylanders would join the Southern cause. The union garrison at Harpers Ferry threatened his supply line through the Shenandoah Valley, and it was also a tempting prize. On September 9, 1862, General Lee issued Special Orders 191, calling for General Stonewall Jackson to attack Harpers Ferry from the west, and for Generals Lafayette McLaws and John G. Walker to capture Maryland Heights and Loudoun Heights overlooking the town.

The siege began on September 12th with the Confederates opening fire from Loudoun Heights. On September 13th, Walker's troops captured Maryland Heights. Once artillery was established on the surrounding hills, Harpers Ferry was basically indefensible. On September 14th, the Confederate artillery blasted away at the garrison below "trapped like fish in a barrel."⁸⁰ On the morning of September 15, Colonel Dixon S. Miles, allegedly unaware that reinforcements were approaching, persuaded the other commanding officers of the futility of resistance against such an intense bombardment and surrendered. The battle was over approximately one hour after it had begun.

Jennie and her family survived the barrage by taking shelter in their cellar. She recalled September 15th, the day of surrender, this way:

The federal troops were encamped all around us, and shell exploded in front of the cellar door; another cut a limb from a large tree at the corner of the house. At about ten o'clock A. M. the firing ceased and we were called out to gaze upon the white flag on Bolivar Heights. The grape shot, shell, cannon balls, etc. were lying almost like hail over the lawn and field of the farm. Several shell had struck the barn. The Confederates were on Maryland Heights – Loudoun Heights – and came in from Shenandoah

⁸⁰ James M. McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 110.

Valley over Bolivar Heights.⁸¹

This battle marked the surrender of the largest number of federal troops in the Civil War, but casualties were light on both sides. General A. P. Hill remained behind to accept the surrender, but the rest of the Confederate army left immediately to join General Lee in Sharpsburg. The terms of the surrender were generous. Hill paroled all 11,000 prisoners. The spoils included 13,000 stand of arms, 73 pieces of artillery, a large number of wagons, and commissary, ordnance and quartermaster stores.⁸²

After the battle was over, Jennie mourned for Harpers Ferry, which she described as “literally torn to pieces.” She seemed to find comfort in the camaraderie of the Confederate and Union soldiers as they mingled on the grounds. Although Jennie’s recollection of the surrender was undated, she may have written it during the 1880’s when the country yearned for reunion. She may have wanted to remind her countrymen that even during the war there were precious moments of reconciliation and fraternity:

Many brotherly pleasantries were exchanged. I remember of father passing ‘round a large basket of peaches to the blue and the Gray indiscriminately, as they sat conversing. I looked at them and said “See what you are doing? Awhile ago you were in deadly combat. Now you are friends.” The answer came “Where we are in war...we are brothers, when the battles are over we are brothers.”⁸³

Jennie recalled the pitiful appearance of the Confederate soldiers. As they sat on Bolivar Heights on September 15th, they “were ragged, barefooted, dusty and hungry as wolves.” They certainly did not look like the victors. Jennie noted that “in appearance they appealed to the sympathy of even their enemies....”⁸⁴ A Shepherdstown woman,

⁸¹ Jennie Chambers, "It Was Seldom Found to Be 'All Quiet on the Potomac'..." (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

⁸² Bushong, 217. Hearn, 189.

⁸³ Chambers, "It Was Seldom Found to Be 'All Quiet on the Potomac'..."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

living a few miles from Harpers Ferry, also wrote about the poor, even shocking, condition of the Confederate soldiers during this campaign. During the course of the war, she saw “troops march past us every summer for four years...but never before or after did I see anything comparable....That they could march or fight at all seemed incredible.”⁸⁵

According to some reports, General Jackson looked as ragged and as dusty as his men. Jennie may have seen General Jackson that day because he paid a brief visit to the Union lines after the surrender. Amazed at the General’s appearance, one Union soldier, described Jackson as “dressed in the coarsest kind of homespun, seedy and dirty at that; wore an old hat which any Northern beggar would consider an insult to offer him, and in his general appearance was in no respect to be distinguished from the mongrel, barefooted crew who follow his fortunes.”⁸⁶ Another, who was more in awe of the General’s brilliant military strategy, said, “Boys, he’s not much for looks, but if we’d had him we wouldn’t have been caught in this trap.”⁸⁷

Jennie remembered that the talk among the Union soldiers reflected their disgust with their commanding officer, Colonel Miles. Jennie wrote: “His men were greatly incensed and loudly proclaimed at the time that he was a traitor, and he’d got them in a trap. One of the men said ‘we might as well been in the bottom of a tea cup with cannon all round the top as to have been in Harpers Ferry after Maryland and Loudoun Heights were surrendered.’”⁸⁸ Just after Miles gave the order to hoist the white flag on Bolivar Heights, a shell exploded and the Colonel was mortally wounded. One soldier reported

⁸⁵ McPherson, 99.

⁸⁶ Hearn, 189. Quoting Binney's Report, 18 September 1862, OR, XIX, Pt. 1, 539-540.

⁸⁷ McPherson, 111.

⁸⁸ Chambers, "It Was Seldom Found to Be 'All Quiet on the Potomac'..."

that it was difficult to find anyone to carry Miles off the field. Miles died the following day, on September 16, 1862, in Harpers Ferry.⁸⁹

The next day the people in Harpers Ferry could all hear the distant roar of the cannons from the Battle of Antietam. That battle, fought on September 17, 1862, would go down in history as the bloodiest in American history, with more than six thousand killed. Jennie observed the reaction of the paroled soldiers who “walked restlessly through the streets powerless to offer aid.” She believed their situation to be “trying in the extreme to men’s souls, they could hear the cannonading, every roar, seeming to be an appeal ‘To come over and help us!’”⁹⁰

On September 22, 1862, the same day that President Lincoln announced the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, federal troops under the command of Union General Ambrose Burnside reoccupied Harpers Ferry. The Union troops reentered Harpers Ferry with a flourish. Jennie and the other loyalists in town probably rejoiced as the 14th Connecticut marched into town, although they may have had mixed emotions about the choice of music. The band played and the men sang the newly popular song, “John Brown’s Body.” The men reportedly passed by John Brown’s fort in hushed and reverent tones.⁹¹

By September 24, the large Army of the Potomac began pitching their tents on Camp Hill and on and around the Chambers’ farm on Bolivar Heights. Some soldiers may have been less than thrilled at their new tour of duty. A reporter from the *New York Tribune* described the march through the Ferry, “...up among the long, bare deserted walls of the ruined Government Armory; past the deserted engine-house which Old John

⁸⁹ McPherson, 110. Hearn, 186. Quoting Binney's Report, 18 September 1862, OR, XIX, Pt. 1, 539.

⁹⁰ Chambers, "It Was Seldom Found to Be 'All Quiet on the Potomac'..."

⁹¹ Hearn, 192.

Brown made historic; up the dingy, antique oriental looking town of Harper's Ferry, sadly worn, almost washed away by the ebb and flow of war; up through the village of Bolivar to these Hights [sic], where we pitched our tents."⁹²

Not long after Union troops reoccupied Harpers Ferry, General George B. McClellan talked of making the town his base of operations, rebuilding the railroad bridge over the Potomac, and constructing a wagon bridge over the Shenandoah. President Abraham Lincoln, concerned that McClellan might hunker down in Harpers Ferry, paid him a visit to prod him along.

Jennie may have been one of the townspeople who saw Lincoln on October 1, 1862 when he conducted a full dress review of the troops, walked through the town, and visited John Brown's fort. According to observer, and later author, Albert D. Richardson, the Chief Executive, though gaunt and dressed plainly in frock coat and stovepipe hat, made a lasting impression on those who saw him that day.⁹³ It seems likely that Jennie, young and passionate Unionist, would have been thrilled to see him.

While some writers described the massive encampment of thousands of soldiers romantically, others took a dim view of the crowded, unhealthy conditions. Historian Barry and others, struck by the impressive display of hundreds of campfires at night, compared the glow of the fires to the lights of a great city lit with gas.⁹⁴ Chaplain John H. W. Stuckenberg of the 145th Pennsylvania, was more concerned with the wretched camp conditions. After a visit to Harpers Ferry on October 6, the chaplain reported on

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 194.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 193. Barry, 126.

the contaminated water, the maggot infested pork, and the men laying around with dysentery, rheumatism, measles, and colds. He considered the place a stinkhole.⁹⁵

By the winter of 1862, the Chambers had had enough. Acting upon Union General Geary's advice, Edmund Chambers requested and received an appraisal of his property's value and then, with his family, departed Harpers Ferry, leaving Buena Vista under Geary's protection. For the next three years, Jennie lived with her family in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, where her father worked for Mr. Barton Jenks, a government contractor, making guns for the war.

A few weeks after Jennie and her family left Harpers Ferry, this family of staunch and loyal Unionists received galling news. Buena Vista, their beautiful farm on the Shenandoah River, was destroyed not by the enemy but by Federal troops. Despite his pledge to protect the property, Union General John W. Geary, reassigned shortly after the Chambers departed for Bridesburg, was unable to prevent the razing of Buena Vista. According to friends and relatives who remained behind in Harpers Ferry, the men of the 14th Regiment, Pennsylvania Cavalry, under the command of Colonel J. M. Schoonmaker, demolished the farm.

During her three years in exile, Jennie travelled occasionally and visited her relatives, the Millers, near Sandy Hook, Maryland, so she was probably well aware of the ongoing devastation of Harpers Ferry. While no major battles were fought in Harpers Ferry after Union Colonel Dixon S. Miles' surrender of eleven thousand Federal troops on September 15, 1862, the town changed hands eight more times, and it continued to suffer in the tug of war between its alternating masters.

⁹⁵ Hearn, 196.

Months after Jennie and her family had left the Ferry, during the summer of 1863, Charles Moulton, a discerning observer and soldier of the 34th Massachusetts, described Harpers Ferry's strange duality in a letter to his mother. Even though the busy, prosperous town was now devastated, he could still recognize its beauty. First praising the "splendid landscape" and the magnificent natural setting of the town, he then reported on its dismal condition:

...but now all is desolated and utter ruin; war has had its effect and laid every thing waste and barren. The extensive ruins of the arsenal lie prominently in view, extending over a quarter of a mile in length. The old building where John Brown barricaded himself, stands nearest to the bridge fronting the river and several other scars can be witnessed here, adding to the description of this historical old town. The depot and hotel together with the larger portion of the houses all lie in ruins and the entire place is not actually worth \$10."⁹⁶

Although Charles Moulton took a dim view of the town's worth, Jennie and her family considered it priceless. Upon their return to Harpers Ferry, they would face considerable challenges of reintegration and rebuilding, but the family's roots in the place ran deep. Edmund and Mary Chambers had already built lives in Harpers Ferry, and they were ready to reclaim them. Jennie, in love with her heritage, with the land of her fathers, would begin to build her own life around that love, dedicating herself to preserving its past and ensuring its future.

⁹⁶ Charles H. Moulton, *Fort Lyon to Harper's Ferry : On the Border of North and South With "Rambling Jour" : The Civil War Letters and Newspaper Dispatches of Charles H. Moulton (34th Mass. Vol. Inf.)*, ed. Lee C. Drickamer and Karen D. Drickamer (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Co., 1987), 124.

CHAPTER 2

LOVES, LOST

Jennie Chambers, historian and essayist, wrote about many subjects during her lifetime, but she left only a brief record of her inner thoughts and feelings. Two of these documents – a confession and a poem – both composed by Jennie in her later years -- appeared to describe her feelings about two men she loved and lost: a soldier from Alabama, whom she never named, and a lawyer from Ireland, Charles Davies. She also preserved her love letters from Charles Davies, a record of their courtship from 1866 through 1877, which permitted a reflection of her emotional life through his eyes. From the limited sources she left behind about her intimate life, Chapter 2 ventures an understanding of Jennie Chambers' experiences in love – two passionate but thwarted romances which bridge the main acts of Jennie's life.

A Soldier From Alabama

Jennie Chambers met and fell in love with a soldier from the 4th Alabama Regiment during the opening days of the Civil War. In the summer of 1861, he and his detachment were encamped near her father's farm on Bolivar Heights. Up until the time she met this young man, she had experienced nothing more serious than a few fleeting summer romances. She remarked that "soldier boys had come and soldier boys had gone," leaving behind memories of "pleasant acquaintanceships, little coqueties, innocent joys and gentle regrets." This man was different, however, and, according to Jennie, they fell in love at first sight. As she stood face to face "with the embodiment of her romantic dreams," eighteen year old Jennie found herself willing, for the first time, to abdicate "her queenly throne in favor of the king her master." As for her lover, he

confessed that “he had recognized his own fate from the first moment that his eyes looked into mine and had trembled lest his suit prove in vain.” Apparently his suit was not in vain. A few weeks after they met they “were pledged to each other for all time.”

Jennie poignantly described their parting. One evening in July, her lover came to tell her that he must leave for Manassas the next day. Upon hearing this devastating news, she felt faint and would have fallen “but for the support of his arm.” A premonition of evil settled down upon her, but she attempted to recover her normal cheerful manner for his sake. They spoke “hopefully” of the future. When it was time for him to leave, she clung to him with tears streaming down her face. She begged him to let her know “whether he fared well or ill.” He promised her he would do his best. Trusting in “the strength of his great honest heart and indomitable will,” she thus felt some relief and comfort.

Pressuring him for further reassurance, Jennie asked her lover how she would know if anything happened to him, imploring him to “come back” to her if he were injured “or – or – killed.” Looking back on that moment years later, she considered her request “the question of a foolish young girl.” Her lover, however, accepted her sincerity and honored her solemnity, and, looking her “straight in the eyes,” granted her request in like manner, “If it be possible, I will, so help me God.” As he turned to leave, she took a crimson rose from a nearby bush and gave it to him as a keepsake. She remembered he “laughingly” received it with gallantry, “With such a talisman your Knight will live to become a grey-haired nuisance.” With these, her lover’s final, words, she wrote, “And so we parted.”

The next day, the whole regimental band played “The Girl I Left Behind Me” as her first great love marched away. Hearing the song, overtaken with sadness, she described the enormity of the moment for her: “...and with one great sob I threw myself across the bed and lay there for hours in utter abandonment to despairing grief.”

Jennie wrote about this first love forty years after she experienced it, when she was fifty-seven years old. Prior to making her confession, Jennie had spent the day, a “long, sunny day,” watching a parade of heroes, returned from “across the blue waters,” march through the streets of Harpers Ferry. She described a fevered, blood-stirring scene: the “tumultuous enthusiasm,” the “bewildering uproar,” and the “patriotic fervor” of the cheering crowd; the “rhythmic precision of the tramp, tramp, tramp” of the soldiers’ feet; the “crackle and snap of the breeze blown bunting;” the “roar of artillery;” and the “stirring military music.” The sights and sounds aroused the emotions of even “steady old heads like mine,” causing her to feel “the hot flush of pride,” and tempting her “to frantically wave...and shout a wild “hurrah!”

After the excitement and noise of the parade, honoring soldiers from what must have been the Spanish-American War, she returned to the “quiet of my suburban home” in the evening. As she sat by her open window, twilight deepened into night. A wind arose “with a mournful sigh” and swayed the branches of a rose bush into a slanting ray of electric light. There, in the center of the “brilliant patch of light,” she beheld “a blood red blossom, nodding, nodding toward me.” Startled, she then heard “the almost inaudible strains” of “The Girl I Left Behind Me.” In that instant, she wrote, “my blood seemed suddenly frozen in my veins and my heart ceased beating.” She fell unconscious, awaking later to find herself “all in a heap on the floor.”

In writing her confession, Jennie wrote that she had “to fight down the wish that this day had never been.” She chided herself for being “a foolish old woman,” for acting like a “silly...old grey-head,” for giving way thus to “foolish fancies.” But she understood herself well enough to know that if she unburdened herself of this deep, dark secret love, she might find some relief from her “over-wrought nerves.”

In this confession made in the last six years of her life, she made a startling, and if true, heartbreaking revelation. Looking back forty years later on “those happy days” spent with her Alabama soldier, she acknowledged “life was ne’er before, nor has been since, the same.”¹

A Lawyer From Ireland

Jennie met Charles Davies in Harpers Ferry after the Civil War. A native of Ireland, Charles Davies was forty-two years old, twenty years Jennie’s senior, when he opened a law office in Lower Town Harpers Ferry around 1866. Nothing in Jennie’s papers indicated why Mr. Davies emigrated from Ireland or why he chose to settle in Harpers Ferry. Perhaps another son (or daughter) of Ireland enticed him to start a law business there. By 1866, the population of Harpers Ferry included a sizeable, growing, and close-knit second and third generation Irish community, many of whom were prominent and influential merchants.²

Almost everything we know about Jennie’s love affair with Charles Davies comes from his letters to her. Jennie kept one hundred seventy-two of Charles’ letters, a collection that was much larger than from any other single correspondent. The letters spanned a period of twelve years, from 1866 to 1877. Although I attempted to locate

¹ Jennie Chambers, "All This Long, Sunny Day...."

² Susan E. Winter, "Social Dynamics and Structure in Lower Town Harpers Ferry," *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 4 (1994): 18.

Charles Davies' papers in the hope of finding some of Jennie's letters to him, my search yielded no such collection.

In her book *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, Ellen K. Rothman pointed out that for the years she studied, 1770-1920, courtship letters were more than artifacts of a relationship; they were often, for a time, the relationship itself.³ Charles' letters to Jennie, and presumably hers to him, certainly constituted a significant element in their courtship, especially in the beginning.

The 1866 letters showed that Charles Davies was besotted with Jennie. Beautiful in form and style, as well as in content, they were full of romance and poetry. Very neatly written on personal stationery, they showed that he took great care in their presentation. One interesting aside about these letters was the anomaly that Charles, who was so literate and literary, did not spell Jennie's name as she preferred it, addressing his most intimate confessions of love to dearest "Jenny" for the entire first year of their courtship. Equally interesting was the fact that Jennie apparently chose not to tell Charles about the misspelling.

In 1866, Charles and Jennie spent a great deal of time together. Charles called on Jennie regularly, at least several evenings a week and almost always on Sunday. They sometimes took walks or went riding alone, but they were often in the presence of others. Thus, many times Charles wrote letters just hours after seeing Jennie, carrying on a conversation they had begun earlier, expressing intimacies he had been unable to share, for one reason or another, when they were together. The act of writing to Jennie, putting

³ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 9.

pen and thoughts to paper, seemed to conjure her presence for him, giving him “the satisfaction of fancying, at least, that I am talking to you...”⁴

The tone of the letters changed over the years. The 1866 letters were intense and intimate. In addition to describing their growing love for one another, they chronicled the drama of lovers’ quarrels and misunderstandings. Then, among the dated letters, there was a mysterious gap in the collection – for the entire year of 1867 until April 1, 1868. From that April Fool’s Day on, Charles addressed his letters to “Jennie,” only occasionally lapsing to “Jenny” when in great haste.

As the years went by, the letters recorded more absences from each other. Both Charles and Jennie travelled, he usually in the course of his work, she to visit family and friends. Charles frequently began his letters with excuses and apologies for not getting up the hill to see her, most often because he was either too busy preparing for a court trial or because he was not feeling well. Sometimes he blamed his absences on inclement weather. On the whole, his letters grew shorter in length. He continued to maintain his sincere and undying love for her, but he expressed it in fewer words.

During the middle years of their courtship, Charles’ letters took on a more practical and mundane function. He confirmed the places and dates of their next social engagements. He discussed details of errands he ran for her when he visited various cities. He forwarded newspapers and *Harper’s* to her, sometimes recommending articles for her to read. He conveyed more outside news -- about the cases he was working on -- about the people he had seen -- and decidedly less passion. His closings became less effusive and more perfunctory. Overall, his tone grew more companionable and relaxed,

⁴ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 28 October 1866.

as if he and Jennie were an old married couple, with him, the “pretend” husband, taking their love for granted.

Then, In February 1877, a curious notice appeared in the *Spirit of Jefferson*. It read: “Charles Davies, Esq., of Harper’s Ferry, has the neatest and cosiest law office in the county, but lacks one thing needful – a better half to share his joys.”⁵ Was Charles applying public pressure on Jennie to marry him? Or was he, perhaps, putting Jennie on notice?

In the final letters in the collection, dating from July through December 1877, Charles’ tone changed to one of excitement and enthusiasm. Charles was riding high -- successful in court, active in politics, in demand as a speaker. The newspapers faithfully reported on his activities. He took on no less a personage than John A. Thomson, eminent scholar and President of West Virginia University, in a public debate over the historical authority of Homer. The *Virginia Free Press* published a lengthy letter from Charles to President Thomson on the topic.⁶

In a subsequent letter referring to this good-natured, academic dust-up, the anonymous “Quirk” of Harpers Ferry praised the erudition of both Thomson and Davies and welcomed such a spirited debate of the classics. With a feeling of Irish national pride, Quirk wrote, “Charles Davies is the countryman of Burk, Sheridan, Curran, and Gratian, not to mention ‘Quirk’ or the Senior of ‘The Free Press,’ and there is no endowment for which any of these great men were or are remarkable that Mr. Davies does not possess in an eminent degree.” Describing Charles as “a very promising young man,” commentator Quirk looked with pride upon “what Mr. Davies has already

⁵ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 6 February 1877, p3c1.

⁶ *Virginia Free Press*, 13 October 1877, p2c2,3.

achieved, as well as the highest anticipation of what is to come.” Professing to have it on the very highest authority, he went on to boast that “in a certain argument before our learned Circuit Judge, Mr. Davies displayed the very perfection of forensic wit.”⁷

Who was “Quirk?” Known to local readers as a regular contributor to the newspaper, he may have been a friend and admirer of Charles, or he may have been Charles Davies himself, a man who was known not only for his forensic wit but for his mischievous sense of humor as well.

The high profile, flamboyant Charles seemed to want Jennie to share in his success, but he offered her few words of love. His letters grew more lengthy as he chronicled every detail of his travels and reveled in the acclaim he was receiving. In a letter dating from this period, Charles wrote, “I have been right busy for a few days – day & night, reading, writing, riding, driving, rail roading – in the county yesterday – in the county this m’g early – going to Martinsburg at 10, to Charlestown probably at 2, & this will continue till after Friday – but my heart & love with you all the while.”⁸ In another letter, he wrote that he was thinking of her but could not say more because he wrote in a public room “surrounded by everyone.” Finally in November, perhaps to atone for his neglect, Charles wrote, “Writing all this means that I love you very much – just the same as if I said it over & over again.” Whereas in his earlier letters, Charles took great trouble with conveying multiple endearments in his closings, during this period, Charles closed most letters simply, usually “in haste” signing off with “as ever yours.”⁹

So what happened? Did the absence of letters after 1877 mark the end of the love affair? One additional piece of circumstantial evidence suggested that their relationship

⁷ *Virginia Free Press*, 17 November 1877, p2c3.

⁸ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, ? July 1877.

⁹ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 3 November 1877.

ended around that time. Jennie withdrew her membership from the Presbyterian Church, very likely “his” church, where she and Charles had worshipped together, effective September 29, 1877. She kept a letter signed by John A. McCreight, Clerk, (who was also a prominent businessman and personal friend with whom Charles and Jennie socialized as a couple), certifying “that Miss Jennie Chambers is a member in good and regular standing in the Presbyterian Church of Harpers Ferry, West Va., and at her request is hereby dismissed to unite with any Church in Christ where God in his providence may call her....”¹⁰ For Jennie, the act of severing her ties to the Presbyterian Church would have been undertaken quite seriously, and it may have been an outward and visible sign to all that she was ending her relationship with Charles.

If Charles were heartbroken at this turn of events, he managed to stay busy. He continued to practice law, to engage in politics, and to lecture at various events. He continued to maintain a political and civic relationship with Jennie’s father, Edmund. In April 1878, Charles and associate William Travers represented Edmund Chambers in a court action contesting the Harpers Ferry mayoral election. Edmund brought suit after he lost the election to George Green by one vote, but Davies’ arguments did not prevail, and the jury upheld Mr. Green’s victory. In 1879, Edmund and Charles both supported the construction of the Shenandoah River Bridge, believing it would be beneficial to Harpers Ferry, and they and others formed a committee to mount a legal fight to remove an injunction against the Bridge Company.

For the next few years, Charles appeared to move freely in the social circles he and Jennie had formerly frequented. The newspapers contained many notices of his speaking engagements across the state of West Virginia – in Charlestown, Martinsburg,

¹⁰ John A. McCreight, [To Whom It May Concern], 29 September 1887.

Moorefield, Fairmont, and Morgantown. In 1879, he spoke at the commencement exercises held at the University of West Virginia in Morgantown, and he also delivered an address on “Columbus and the Discovery of America” to the West Virginia Historical Society.

In contrast to the frequent notices about Charles, the newspapers contained no information about Jennie’s comings and goings during this period. Two weeks after Jennie’s father lost his court case to George Green, a newspaper reported that Edmund Chambers was “seriously ill.”¹¹ Perhaps Jennie retreated from attending social and cultural events for awhile to care for her ailing father.

In the midst of all of his travels, Charles had an accident. In March 1879, as he was attempting to catch a train at Halltown, he slipped and fell under a rolling railroad car. Miraculously, he was not injured. When asked by a reporter what he was thinking about during his moments of danger, Charles replied, “I was thinking of some verses I had promised to write in a lady’s album.”¹² Was Charles speaking of Jennie, perhaps, or was he referring to a new love? If the latter, Jennie may have been hurt by this public revelation. He had begun their courtship, many years before, by wooing her with his poetry.

Then, Charles and a colleague, one whom he had worked alongside in the judicial system for many years, the Honorable Daniel Bedinger Lucas, engaged in a public name-calling contest. The acrimonious battle of words began with an interview Charles gave to the *Wheeling Register* about the upcoming 1879 Congressional contest. In it, Charles spoke favorably of his friend, Judge Hoge, Lucas’s unannounced but probable opponent

¹¹ *Virginia Free Press*, 11 May 1878, p2c3.

¹² *Spirit of Jefferson*, 18 March 1879, p3c1.

in the race; Lucas took offense; and their initially unpleasant, and then vitriolic, exchange took place in interviews and letters published in the *Spirit of Jefferson*.

In one interview, Mr. Lucas derisively referred to Charles as “a fellow of infinite jest,” characterizing him as “one of the slyest, but bitterest and most ingrained Radicals” in the second Congressional district. He concluded his statement by saying, “In this section, where his calibre and political affiliations are known, I think I may safely say that if Judge Hoge can stand his praise, I certainly can stand his censure.”¹³

In his letter of response, Charles poked fun at Lucas as a statesman, accusing him of being as jealous as a “school girl.” He also mocked Mr. Lucas’ pretensions as a poet, calling him “a foolish young man, who, for years, had been filled with the insane idea he was a poet – forgetting that the poet is born, not made, and that a genial, kindly, generous nature is as necessary to good poetry as sunshine and shower is to the harvest.”¹⁴ With this statement, Charles Davies struck a blow to the cultural tastes of the entire region, as Daniel B. Lucas was known far and wide as the Poet of the Shenandoah Valley.¹⁵

This response may have been considered a little over the top, or perhaps below the belt, by some in Harpers Ferry. Mr. Lucas, a native of the area from a prominent, blue-blooded family, was a favorite son, and Mr. Davies, though an educated man of great wit, was, after all, an upstart from elsewhere, and a foreigner to boot. Charles suddenly may have found some doors, formerly open, now closed to him. In any case, although Charles and Jennie were most likely no longer a couple, Jennie may have found it impossible, in the small town of Harpers Ferry, to escape news and gossip about him.

¹³ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 8 July 1879, p2c4,5.

¹⁴ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 15 July 1879, p3c2.

¹⁵ Millard Kessler Bushong, *Historic Jefferson County* (Boyce, VA: Carr Publishing Co., 1972), 429.

In April 1881, Charles left Harpers Ferry for Washington, D.C., after he was appointed to a clerkship in the national Pension Office. In publishing notice of his departure, the *Virginia Free Press* loyally noted that the position of Director would have been a better match given Mr. Davies' experience and ability, thereby implying that this new appointment was beneath him. The newspaper expressed regret about "the removal of Mr. Davies from our midst, " adding "and we but echo the voice of the community."¹⁶

Surprisingly, Jennie followed Charles to Washington and found work there. In so doing, she may have risked offending her family's, and her community's, sense of propriety. She must have been strongly motivated to take such a risk. Perhaps Jennie had second thoughts about her future without Charles, and, on impulse, made a last ditch effort to salvage the relationship.

Whatever her reasons for moving, she did not remain in Washington for long. Her job as a seamstress in a children's home did not suit her, and she grew homesick for her family and Harpers Ferry.¹⁷ Perhaps she realized that what she once had with Charles was over. Perhaps he told her so. By September 1881, Jennie was back living in Harpers Ferry, where she remained for the rest of her life.

Charles Davies married Miss Louisa M. Warren on August 30, 1883. West Virginia newspapers reported that the wedding took place at the home of the bride's mother in Washington, D.C. and that the ceremony was performed by Dr. Paret.¹⁸ At long last, Charles was wed. He was fifty-nine years old at the time.

After his marriage, Charles returned to Harpers Ferry, at least twice, for speaking engagements. Did his wife accompany him? If so, had Jennie recovered from the sting

¹⁶ *Virginia Free Press*, 16 April 1881, p3c1.

¹⁷ Maggie Garrett, Washington, D.C., to Mattie Chambers, Harpers Ferry, WV, 16 September 1881.

¹⁸ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 11 September 1883, p2c3.

of their failed relationship by the time Charles returned to town with a wife on his arm? Or, did his reappearance on her home ground open old wounds, as he spoke in places and to audiences that carried memories for them both? In November 1887, Charles spoke at Storer College, a place associated with their mutual friends, the Bracketts, a place where he and Jennie had attended concerts and lectures together. There, he delivered an oration in praise of his favorite Irish poet, Tom Moore, whose poetry he had often quoted in his first letters to Jennie.¹⁹ In 1897, he addressed the Sons of Jonadab, an organization dedicated to promoting temperance, a favorite cause long associated with Jennie and her father in Harpers Ferry.²⁰

In July 1907, two months after Jennie's death in Harpers Ferry, Charles Davies died in Washington, D.C. One West Virginia newspaper remembered him as a person who was "gifted as an orator with pronounced literary tastes."²¹ There was no mention of his career in law.

What prevented Charles and Jennie from getting to yes? On Ellen Rothman's continuum of courtship -- that is, attraction, avowal, commitment, and decision to marry²² -- Charles and Jennie progressed rather rapidly through the first three stages. Within the first year of their courtship, they mutually committed to love each other forever. So what kept them from transitioning to marriage? Before answering this question, however, we might first ask how they reached their mutual commitment so confidently and quickly? The answer may be that, in many ways, Charles Davies and Jennie Chambers appeared to be well suited for each other.

¹⁹ *Virginia Free Press*, 1 December 1887, p3c1.

²⁰ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 30 March 1897, p2c3.

²¹ *Farmers Advocate*, 3 August 1907, p3c4.

²² Rothman, 13.

From his letters, we know that Charles was physically attracted to Jennie. Charles found Jennie beautiful, fair of form and face. On several occasions, he mentioned a proprietary interest in her slim figure, praying that she not get too fat, because “Roses should be round and red, and beautiful in that way, but it is different with the Lilly.” He derived great pleasure from gazing into her eyes, “so innocent and honest and blue.” He also respected her moral purity and sincerity. He prized her “goodness,” often repeating the refrain that he sought to be worthy of it.²³

In addition, Charles and Jennie held many intellectual and spiritual beliefs and interests in common – their Christian faith, their politics, their civic-mindedness, and their devotion to temperance. They were both leaders and activists. Creative people themselves, they valued creativity in others, sharing passions for reading and writing and the arts. They contributed to the cultural life of Harpers Ferry by collaborating on the production of dramatic and musical entertainments. They helped found the Addison Association, a literary society devoted to studying the art of the essay. Having many of the same interests, they cultivated the same friends and travelled in the same social circles. They enjoyed their many outdoor excursions, where they might appreciate the beauties of nature, as they rode or walked together.

Absent Jennie’s words on the subject, we can only speculate about what she saw in Charles. She most likely saw an eligible, mature, educated, cultured man. Although not wealthy, he could support her with his earnings as an attorney. He worked hard and achieved success. A voluble Irishman, he was witty and charming. He made friends easily and was accepted among some of the most influential and powerful men in the community.

²³ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 6 July 1866, 15 December 1868.

From his letters, we know that Charles appreciated Jennie's family and honored her loyalty to them. He was especially kind to her younger sisters, remembering them on special occasions, and including them whenever possible. He knew many of her relatives, kept up with them, did them favors, and often visited their homes on his travels. He ran in the same political circles as her father, Edmund Chambers. Both men actively supported the Radical Republican party, and they worked together to promote the party's platform and to win elections. Sometimes they appeared as candidates together on the same Radical Republican ticket. When Edmund needed legal advice or representation, he went to Charles for help.

Both Charles and Jennie had sensitive, romantic natures. They wrote each other poetry and sent each other flowers. Charles' early letters, at least, were full of his undying and eternal love for Jennie, and he was creative enough to find many different ways to express it. Perhaps, at times, Jennie may have been overwhelmed by his expansiveness, believing her letters to be rather inadequate in comparison to his. Charles referred to this concern – "You complain, Darling, that when writing, you can only repeat that you love me" – but he quickly reassured her that such a declaration from her was enough, more than enough, for him.²⁴

With so many interests in common, what kept them apart? Some clues appeared early on. Just as Charles began to court Jennie, escorting her to picnics and to church exhibitions, writing her poetry about the language of flowers, rumors surfaced about his past. Jennie began to hear from her friends, and from his, that Charles carried on a "flirtation" with a married lady the year before. In what he called a "frank and honest confession," he admitted to finding "some consolation" for his formerly "miserable and

²⁴ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 27 September 1866.

aimless existence” while “in the companionship of an intelligent, generous and sympathizing woman.” He admitted feeling grateful to this woman for her “kindness” and “appreciative of a thousand excellencies,” but he denied committing “any unworthy act.”

Furthermore, he wanted Jennie to know that what happened a year ago was part of his old life. He wrote that “since I knew you, avoiding such faults and dropping such vices, as I could detect, I have endeavoured with a straining heart, to become at least, a little more worthy of the dear, generous girl, whose love, is now worth the virtuous devotion of a whole life.” He asked her to trust him, concluding with his nightly prayer: “God grant that our mutual love and confidence be daily increased, and tend to his glory, and, with his blessing, to our happiness.”²⁵

Apparently Charles persuaded Jennie that she was his one and only and that he was only interested in a future with her, but he did not convince her mother. Mary Chambers would not give Charles the benefit of the doubt, because, for some unexplained reason, Charles’ evening visits to Jennie had provoked neighborhood gossip. She most likely believed that Charles did not have Jennie’s best interests in mind by making her the target of tattlers. Occasionally, Mary took to joining the two lovers when Charles visited, perhaps to allay the neighbors’ suspicions.

Charles responded to their determined chaperone with diplomacy, assuring Jennie that her mother’s presence “only increased my happiness, and dare I say – our happiness, my Jenny.” Explaining that his intentions were honorable, he wrote: “Stolen fruit may be very sweet, but it has not the flavor of that which is honestly asked, and generously given.” In a postscript to one of his letters, Charles gamely bowed to Mary’s concern

²⁵ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 17 July 1866.

about propriety and promised to arrive earlier than usual: “Your mother is right. I am most anxious too to see my darling by daylight, and so, shall be up this E’g, bright and early.”²⁶

In her study of courtship, Rothman noted that middle class girls coming of age after the Civil War typically sought advice and direction from their mothers about many matters, including affairs of the heart. As family size decreased, middle class women could and often did develop confidential relationships with their daughters.²⁷ Jennie, although an independent, and sometimes defiant, young woman, adored her mother and she was probably influenced by Mary’s disapproving voice in her ear. While Mary apparently never forbade Charles’ visits nor insisted that Jennie break off the relationship, she maintained a steady, gentle opposition to Charles, at least throughout the early years of the courtship.

Then, in October, Mary complained to Jenny of Charles’ “irreverence in religious matters.” Charles never described the incident that sparked this criticism, but he railed against it and also against the constant scrutiny he had to endure: “Irreverence! How foreign to my nature, and to every lesson I ever received! How unjust! And yet, when I remember that every idle word and thought will have to be accounted for, can I complain?”²⁸

Within two weeks, Jennie’s father, Edmund, must also have registered his disapproval. Jennie probably told Charles about the pressure she was experiencing at home. In an impassioned letter to her, Charles asked why “your folk” would not, for the sake of their daughter’s happiness, be reasonable and have for him “the consideration that

²⁶ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 6 July 1866.

²⁷ Rothman, 217.

²⁸ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 10 October 1866.

young men have the right to expect and usually receive.” He argued that if they would be reasonable and have patience, they would soon have no objections of any kind.

Despite how “disagreeable” everything was around them, Charles claimed that he would have “consolation sufficient even now to make me happy,” were it not for Jennie’s ill health and for her suffering caused by her parent’s objections. If he could only impart some of his own happiness to Jennie, he would rejoice because “it would be manufacturing sun-beams out of shadows.”

In this important letter, Charles introduced the strategy that the two lovers would pursue for the next eleven years. Knowing that they loved each other, and that they would “never cease to love,” Charles agreed to wait. He wrote: “Let us then endure as best we can, for the present, -- quietly take the time, that will not be quietly given us, and then, -- in a little while, when no earthly objection exists – but Jenny – dearest – best, loving fancy out-runs my pen, and gives to me the one right I ask on Earth – to call you mine, and I am too – too happy.”²⁹

The problem was that this strategy of “enduring” did not work for either one of them. Although they had mutually promised that nothing should ever divide them, that their love was forever, the weight of waiting cracked the foundation of their love. They fell into an unfortunate pattern of behavior – Charles’ perceived and actual neglect, Jennie’s tears and suffering, Charles’s apology, Jennie’s forgiveness, and then the cycle would begin again. Over the years, Charles focused more of his attention on work, spending increasingly more time away from Harpers Ferry. In his travels, he came into contact with interesting people. As a consequence, his circle of friends and acquaintances expanded, while Jennie’s remained about the same. They seemed to spend

²⁹ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 22 October 1866.

less and less time together. In addition, neither Charles nor Jennie enjoyed good health, and their various illnesses contributed to keeping them apart.

Their relationship seemed to gradually erode, but, given its initial intensity, along with the mutual commitment by the lovers and their delicate sensibilities, it seemed more likely that Charles and Jennie split apart with a bang, not a whimper. In his latter letters, Charles described being invited to teas, weddings, confirmations, and other social events. In the eyes of the world, he appeared to be an eligible bachelor. Perhaps Charles resumed his “flirtations,” which Jennie, most probably, would not have found tolerable. Perhaps he offended a family member in some egregious way. We will never know for sure.

In 1890, thirteen years after Charles’ last known letter to her, Jennie wrote a poem, entitled “Good-bye.” This poem was not among Jennie’s personal papers at Duke University but appeared among those of the West Virginia Writers’ Program at the University of West Virginia. She may have composed it as an epitaph for her failed relationship with Charles, over many years before, but it resounded with pain and anger, still deeply felt.

Good-bye

“No! do not speak, You cannot comfort me
 Your silence tells me all I cared to know
 I will not live upon your chairty [sic],
 So, give me back my heart and let me go.
 Your love was far too weak to mate with mine
 Or battle with the waves upon Life’s strand,
 Go! Wend your way where brighter sunbeams shine
 And let my life-blood ebb upon the sand.
 Good-bye! Good-bye! We shall not meet again,
 Since Love is dead and Constancy a lie
 Let me forget that you have ever been,
 Good-bye! frail faith, weak heart, Good-bye, Good-bye!

Time was when I believed you half divine,
 And hung upon your words as heavenly tones,
 Time was when I believed your heart was mine
 That heart which calmly now its faith disowns,
 So go. You shall not see me shed a tear,
 To hold you back or keep me by your side.
 Rob me of all that made me call Life dear,
 But leave to me my honor and my pride,
 Good-bye! Good-bye! We shall not meet again,
 Since Love is dead and Constancy a lie
 Let me forget that you have ever been,
 Good-bye! frail faith, weak heart, Good-bye, Good-bye!"³⁰

Right from the beginning, then, it was all about trust. Although Charles claimed to want to make sun-beams out of shadows -- his shadows -- he never did. Whenever Jennie had doubts about him or about them, Charles, a man who lived for words, always found the right ones to reassure her. She must have wanted to believe him. If Charles, as he claimed, had led an "aimless, useless, ambitionless life" before he met her, he convinced her that she could teach him the better way through her natural purity, honesty, and goodness.³¹

Like many other men and women of their day, Charles and Jennie seemed to accept the notion that it was a woman's role to save a man from his weaknesses, excesses and errors. Jennie, by virtue of her womanly goodness, would help Charles in his struggle for self-control, making him more "manly" by keeping him pure.³² He, in turn, with God's blessing, would love and protect her forever.

Charles and Jennie both willingly entered into this contract, but Jennie turned their marathon courtship into the ultimate endurance test. Charles failed the test. According to Jennie's poem, his heart was far too weak to mate with hers. Perhaps this

³⁰ Jennie Chambers, "Good-Bye," (West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, 1890).

³¹ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 13 August 1866.

³² Rothman, 187.

was so. Would anyone's heart, save one that had shared her youthful experiences of invasion and war, have been strong enough to mate with hers, one that had been "touched with fire?"

Ne'er Before, Nor...Since, the Same

Jennie lost her first love, the soldier from Alabama, to war. She was eighteen at the time. As she grew older, she may have idealized his memory, remembering not so much the man he was but the bold and fearless knight, full of sentiment and chivalry, she believed him to be. He may have become part of the landscape of lofty ideals she pledged herself to in the exciting, war torn days of her youth. In her overwrought, latter life confession of love for this man she barely had time to know, she provided a key insight into her post-war life. She acknowledged to herself and to the world that, compared to those happy days she shared with this soldier, "life was ne'er before, nor has been since, the same."

Perhaps her acknowledgment was an overstatement, but then again maybe it was not all that far from the mark. When Jennie was young, she was forced by the exigencies of war to make choices she was not fully prepared to make. Not mature enough to have fully formed her own values and beliefs, she accepted those of her beloved parents. At the time, she most certainly believed her choices to be right. They had to be right, made as they were against a backdrop of life and death.

After the war, the world changed, but Jennie may have felt compelled to stick with her youthful choices. When her wartime commitments clashed with her more complex, post-war life, where could she go from there? To turn her back on those earlier commitments, so seriously and solemnly undertaken, may have seemed tantamount to

repudiating part, perhaps what she considered to be the best part, of herself. To consider such an act may have felt disloyal, disorienting, even frightening. As an adult, Jennie may have been acutely aware of moral shades of gray, but she may not have been able to reconcile them with the causes and ideals she found to be so noble in her youth.

During the war, Jennie fought for the things she and her parents valued – their faith, family, community, and country. She recognized that her soldier from Alabama fought for ideals he prized, as well, and she loved him for it. Her parents, her soldier, and their ideals were part and parcel of the thrilling, black and white, wartime world of her youth. As an adult, she chose not to renounce those ideals for a more complex, subtly shaded, post-war life with Charles Davies. Rather, she turned away from marriage to Charles to follow another path, perhaps one better suited to her, in which Harpers Ferry, her enduring love, was the better husband.

CHAPTER 3

HARPERS FERRY, A BETTER HUSBAND

After the Civil War ended, Jennie and her family returned to Harpers Ferry. Although they had received reports about the destruction of their farm by Union troops while living in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania, they must have been shocked when they first saw Buena Vista. Everything on the property was destroyed – the house, outbuildings, and fences. The trees were gone. It looked like a “perfect prairie” – or so said Jennie’s father in subsequent war claims.

Although the loss of the farm was a serious setback to the Chambers family, they were far from alone, and they were better off than many of their former neighbors. A large number of farms in Jefferson County had been destroyed, their fences, houses, and barns reduced to “heaps of blackened ruins,” leaving many farmers destitute.¹ Edmund Chambers was not destitute. After leaving Harpers Ferry during the winter of 1862/63, he had held a steady job working for Barton Jenks in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania. When he returned to Harpers Ferry, he moved his family to town, perhaps to property he had purchased before the war.

This move into town may have suited Jennie, a young woman in her early twenties. Harpers Ferry hummed with the activity of townspeople, old and new, as they began to get on with their lives. The population had changed in her absence. Historian Joseph Barry noted that few of the old citizens returned after the Civil War, in particular, few of those who formerly had worked in the armory.² Jennie no longer knew everyone

¹ Millard Kessler Bushong, *Historic Jefferson County* (Boyce, VA: Carr Publishing Co., 1972), 251.

² Joseph Barry, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry : With Legends of the Surrounding Country* (Martinsburg, WV: Thompson Brothers, 1903; reprint, Harpers Ferry, The Woman's Club, 1994), 5.

in her small town, and perhaps more importantly for an adventurous young woman starting a new life, not everyone knew her.

Young men in Union blue uniforms filled the streets, as Harpers Ferry remained under military control for a year after the war ended. Historian Barry described the occupying garrison's high profile, noting "for more than a year after the restoration of peace were the ear-piercing notes of the fife and the boom of the drum heard on the streets..." To citizens who had labored under martial law during much of the war, it must have seemed like business as usual. Barry, characterizing the ferment of the town in early post-war years, noted that "many thought that they had gained but little by cessation of actual warfare."³

Overview of the Post-War Years

While the cessation of warfare may have seemed like more of the same for some, it began a new chapter in Jennie Chambers' life. The blood-stirring, life or death confrontations she experienced as an adolescent girl ended with the restoration of peace. Once, a girl interrupted, and now, a young woman, she set out to craft an adult life in a town she barely recognized among townspeople, a great many of whom, she was just beginning to get to know.

The last chapter described Jennie's long courtship with one of the town's newcomers, a native of Ireland, attorney Charles Davies. As the daughter of a well-respected and influential man, she allied herself for many years with Davies, another powerful man, but they did not marry. During this courtship and after it, Jennie cobbled together a life of singleness in which she was a daughter, sister, aunt, friend, sweetheart, author, artist, and entrepreneur. Under the aegis of her father and her mother, she

³ Ibid., 140.

assumed her place in society, making a life independent of marriage, but not of family and community.

This chapter will suggest that Jennie built a life that was not so much independent, as interdependent. As a single woman, Jennie operated not outside the conventions of nineteenth century society but within them. Adhering to Victorian ideal of home and womanhood, an ideal that rendered home the dominion of females, she played an integral role in more than one household as dutiful daughter, sister, and aunt, ever a willing and devoted helper. Like other ladies of her day, she sought self improvement. During the courtship years with Davies, she developed her artistic talent and intellectual abilities through painting, reading, writing, and travelling. Under Davies' tutelage, Jennie acquired public speaking skills as well.

Also during these years, and then for the rest of her life, she began to step up, like her father before her, to promote community betterment through leadership and participation in various church, benevolent, and civic organizations. These activities were considered suitable for women during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially for otherwise unengaged women who, without a husband and children at home, had the inclination and the time and energy to devote to them. Jennie followed her father's lead by incorporating newcomers into her efforts. With full membership in Harpers Ferry society, Jennie sought to expand its boundaries, as well as to broaden her own horizons, by welcoming and befriending those who brought new blood and progressive ideas to the town.

In the years following the Civil War, Jennie's vocation became Harpers Ferry's rehabilitation and recovery. In an era when few women were gainfully employed outside

the home, Jennie was clever enough to make her vocation pay, and she used it as a means to support herself, both financially and emotionally. Loving Harpers Ferry as she did, she understood and appreciated its strengths, especially its centrality to recent history and its great natural beauty. When heritage tourism of Civil War sites gained popularity in the 1870's,⁴ and when reminiscence developed into a sizeable industry in the 1880's and 1890's,⁵ Jennie used her talents to energetically promote her hometown and to reap the rewards.

Jennie recognized the personal and commercial value of appropriating the unique experiences of her youth to advance herself and to move Harpers Ferry forward. Through her writing, painting, public speaking, and enthusiastic boosterism, she shared her eyewitness accounts of events, while at the same time communicating her love of the place and her knowledge of its history. She tracked down the dispersed soldiers who had spent time in Harpers Ferry prior to and during the war and appealed their post-war yearning to understand what they had lived through. By rallying people, both near and far, to the Ferry, she helped resurrect the town, earn a modest living, and reaffirm her own life.

Jennie dedicated her life to her family, to self-improvement, and to Harpers Ferry. She remained single, but in spite of her unmarried state, she operated at the center of society, not at its margins. In many ways, the interdependence of woman and town resembled a marriage. One might say that Jennie's betrothal occurred when John Brown and his men threatened to destroy Harpers Ferry. Faced with the loss of home and everything it meant to her, she realized how much she loved the place. Her commitment

⁴ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion : The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

only deepened over the years. Jennie and Harpers Ferry seemed well suited for each other. With her artist's soul, Jennie cherished the inward and outward beauty of her beloved. Ultimately, for Jennie Chambers, Harpers Ferry may have proved the better husband.

First, the Family

When the Chambers returned to Harpers Ferry, the household consisted of Jennie, her parents, Edmund and Mary, and her three sisters, Julia, Mattie, and Kate. With her older brother, Edmund, now married and living in his own home, Jennie, the next in line, may have assumed all the responsibilities and privileges incumbent with her newly acquired seniority. Jennie, the oldest daughter and sister, a young woman with a take-charge temperament, was in a good position to play a central role in the new household, to serve as a bridge between the parents and the younger children, perhaps a counselor and confidante to both. It would have been natural for Jennie's parents to depend upon her to be a model for her sisters and for her sisters to look up to her.

As models go, Jennie was a good one. In the younger girls' eyes, Jennie was a fully grown woman, and a beautiful, brave, confident, and talented one at that. Perhaps an object of fascination to them, she held the keys to the mysteries of womanhood, whereas they had yet to make the passage. Among her sisters, Jennie's star may have risen quite high when she brought a beau home, especially a charming one like Charles Davies, a man who brought them gifts and who found "the girls," as he called them, so delightful.

It is possible to speculate that Jennie was a very important person at home. In Harpers Ferry society, her family name accorded her a place of respect as well. During a

greater part of the nineteenth century, southern women assumed their place in society through their families, whether they married and started their own families or remained unmarried.⁶ Jennie belonged to a good, well-established family, one in which the men had a long record of assuming leadership at work, at church, and in the community. Thanks to her father, her uncles, and, increasingly after the war, her older brother, Jennie began her post-war life with a good standing in the community.

Jennie, in turn, carried the torch of her family's name, preserving the heritage of Harpers Ferry and creating a future for the town in which her family's name meant something. She stood alongside her father as the family's ambassador to the outside world, and the Chambers took pride in her artistic, benevolent, and civic accomplishments. In a nineteenth century culture that revered and celebrated family, Jennie embraced and enhanced her family's image and stature, and they, in turn, provided the security and context within which she created and anchored her identity.

The next section of this chapter will discuss in some detail Jennie's father's activities and reputation in order to show the legacy and path he established for her. The following section will then focus on the dynamics of her role in the household and look at the interdependence that characterized Jennie's life. The last two sections will discuss Jennie's dedication to self-improvement and her commitment to community betterment.

A Father's Legacy: Solid Citizen, Fair-Minded Leader

Not long after the family returned to Harpers Ferry, Edmund Chambers, nearly sixty years old, began to reestablish himself as a town leader, proving himself once again to be a solid citizen and a charitable, fair-minded man. Almost immediately, Edmund

⁶ Christine Jacobson Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness : Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.

accepted an appointment to the Southern Relief Committee to collect and distribute contributions for the destitute in the South. After the great flood of 1870, when the rampaging Shenandoah River destroyed seventy homes and killed forty-two people, Edmund Chambers and several other prominent citizens organized a highly acclaimed relief effort to raise money for those in need.

He resumed an active role in both the Methodist Episcopal and the Methodist Protestant churches, which were located right down the street from one another. A prominent lay leader responsible for church governance, Edmund also taught Sunday School. Town historian Barry used a story about a member of one of Chambers' Sunday School classes to illustrate a strange occurrence that foreshadowed the great flood of 1870. In crediting Mr. Edmund H. Chambers as the source of his story, he called Chambers "one of the oldest and most respectable citizens of the place."⁷

Barry, by invoking Edmund's respectability and status as Sunday School teacher, gave credence to an otherwise unbelievable story. This story related how, during class on the Sunday prior to the great flood, a Mrs. Overton, normally a woman of calm disposition, exhibited an extraordinarily high degree of excitement and agitation. At the close of exercises, as she bade fellow pupils farewell, she shook hands with them all and declared she would not see them again this side of the grave. Her words proved prophetic as she perished in the natural disaster later the same week.

In an article describing a property dispute between the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the local newspapers described Edmund, a member of the Board of Trustees, as the "leaven" in the lump of scalawags,

⁷ Barry, 166.

calling him “an old friend” and declaring, “we have some respect for him.”⁸ To thus characterize a man on the opposite side of the political spectrum was high praise indeed from the *Spirit of Jefferson*, a solidly Democratic newspaper.

A life-long evangelist for temperance, Chambers continued his campaign against alcohol when he returned to Harpers Ferry. Edmund must have been well known throughout the community for his intolerance of spiritous liquor. In a letter published in the *Virginia Free Press*, one reader found it humorous and ironic that a half bottle of whiskey was found on Edmund Chambers property, doubly so because it was near Oddfellows Hall, the site of Sons of Temperance meetings.⁹ Upon his death, one obituary characterized him as an “uncompromising antagonist of King Alcohol.”¹⁰

Always an activist, Edmund resumed his leadership in state and local politics. Edmund, who prior to the Civil War considered himself a “life-long” Whig, became a Radical Republican during Reconstruction. He chaired several Republican Conventions in Jefferson County. He ran for office and was elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates in 1868. He was elected mayor of Harpers Ferry for several terms during the 1870’s, and then, after losing a hotly contested election by one vote to George W. Green in 1878, was elected again in 1880. When not in elective office, he served the community as Police Overseer and then as Overseer for the Poor. He was repeatedly appointed to the Grand Jury, a position of public trust.

The Harpers Ferry faction of the Republican party nominated Edmund Chambers to run for the key political office of county sheriff in 1870, but the Shepherdstown faction prevailed, and their candidate, George W. Chase, won the election. Apparently Edmund

⁸ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 5 May 1868, p2c2.

⁹ *Virginia Free Press*, 16 May 1870, p3c2.

¹⁰ *Virginia Free Press*, 15 January 1890, p2c2.

and his supporters did not go down without a fight, however. A *Virginia Free Press* editorial reported that on Election Day in Harpers Ferry, Edmund Chambers name was “wrongly substituted” for the name of George W. Chase.¹¹

The Republican Party included both blacks and whites, but, in an 1870 editorial describing the recent split among local Republicans, the *Spirit of Jefferson* proclaimed that the whites were really running the show. Eager to exacerbate rifts among its opponents, the Democratic newspaper pointed out that one faction, the one Edmund supported, met in Charlestown, “where they were well aware they would be free from any intrusion of other white Radicals; and where they were sure they would have a quorum of ignorant negroes, whom they would twist under their thumbs to suit their fancy.” The editorial boldly proclaimed its complaint in capital letters: “But again alas NOT ONE NEGRO APPEARS ON THE TICKET.” It ended with the lamentation: “Poor Africa! How long does she sigh and plead at the foot of Radical despotism ere she gets her rights?”¹²

Although the partisan *Spirit of Jefferson* indignantly denounced the exclusion of Africa’s natives from the slate of candidates, the newspaper conceded committee participation by blacks. The newspaper further noted that twice as many blacks as whites attended the Radical meeting in Charlestown. While no black men appeared on the ticket of *either* faction of the Radical Republicans in 1870, we note that Edmund, as the elected Chairman of the Charlestown faction, presided over a seven man Executive Committee that included one black in its membership. He also appointed blacks to serve on various standing committees.

¹¹ *Virginia Free Press*, 5 November 1870, p3c2.

¹² *Spirit of Jefferson*, 27 September 1870, p2c2.

Edmund Chambers cultivated friendships and partnerships with newcomers who were interested in progress. Although some of these men were better educated, wealthier, or more sophisticated than he, he did not shy away from forming alliances with the best talent to move his projects forward. Dartmouth educated newcomer Nathan C. Brackett, Principal of Storer College, the newly opened institution of higher learning for blacks in Harpers Ferry, served with Edmund on the Executive Committee of the Radical Republicans. Brackett, Chambers, and another extraordinarily literate newcomer from Ireland, attorney Charles Davies, also an active Republican, often ran for public office on the same ticket and served on the same community improvement committees. Chambers recruited men with money and influence, such as John A. McCreight, an industrialist from Ohio, as well as many others in the town, to petition the federal government to improve navigation on the Shenandoah River by building up the old head wall and by repairing the canals.

As Jennie's older brother, Edmund Binns Chambers, began to take his place in the Harpers Ferry community, Jennie's father teamed up with his son to spur economic growth. Edmund B., who had followed in his father's footsteps as an armorer, then a farmer, was appointed Harpers Ferry Agent for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1873. During a period when father Edmund served several terms as mayor, the B&O Railroad capitalized on the popularity of heritage tourism by investing money in Harpers Ferry. In 1880, the company built a twenty acre recreational park on an island in the Potomac to cater to tourists and residents. The company also sponsored efforts to preserve the history of John Brown's raid, which will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Throughout his life, Edmund Chambers served Harpers Ferry in positions of public trust and in many highly visible ways. This service continued despite the ferment that characterized the town in the years immediately following the Civil War. Hard feelings remained between northerners and southerners in this border region, resulting in contentious disputes over schools, state jurisdiction, loyalty oaths, and property. Remarkably, Edmund managed to thread his way between the factions, creating consensus to get things done. Even his political opponents seemed to respect him as a straightforward, honest, and fair man.

Dutiful Daughter, Sister, Aunt

Jennie's family gave her a sense of worth, a place in society, and a legacy. There was no evidence that her parents ever pressured Jennie, or any of their daughters, to marry, although eventually Julia took a husband and moved out of the family home. Jennie and her two youngest sisters remained single, which was not such an oddity after the Civil War as it may have been before, since the casualties of war had created a generation of women without men.¹³

In this household women, Edmund was the acknowledged breadwinner and head of household, and the women ostensibly deferred to him in matters outside the home. Mary ruled the domestic realm, and as Mattie grew older, she helped her mother keep house. Kate became a teacher and earned a steady income in Harpers Ferry public schools. She presumably contributed at least some of her salary to pay the family's expenses.

¹³ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady : From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 106.

Jennie, apparently, had no fixed responsibilities. The artistic one with interests outside the home, Jennie contributed in various ways. She handled the family's business affairs, helping her father, and after his death, her mother, pursue war claims against the government for the loss of their farm and other property, and she conducted other family legal correspondence. Archivist and record keeper, she preserved the family's letters and papers which were donated to Duke University in the 1950's. In general, she seemed to make herself available for what needed to be done, helping the adults and the children in the family. Judging from a letter written by her sister, Julia Littlejohn, Jennie was a beloved aunt, one who was interested and involved in her nephews' lives.¹⁴

The one area where Jennie may have been less dutiful than her sisters was in her choice of religious affiliation. While her father, mother, brother, sisters, nephews, and nieces were faithful and active Methodists, Jennie chose membership in the Presbyterian Church, at least for a time. In speculating about Jennie's reason for declaring a religious preference that differed from her family's, one might consider some of the usual reasons for preferring one church over another – the quality of the preaching, the music, the language and symbolism of the liturgy, the church building itself, the other people in the congregation.

Perhaps one of the other people in the Presbyterian congregation was her suitor, Charles Davies. Jennie, who led a God-centered life, may have wanted to explore a spiritual oneness with him. In his letters to Jennie, Charles often made reference to his belief that their hearts were united in God, and he frequently invoked God's blessing on their undivided love. It may have been important to both of them to be united in their

¹⁴ Julia Chambers Littlejohn, to Jennie Chambers, 7 January 1882.

place of worship as well, important enough for Jennie to resist the family, in particular her father, who was a pillar of the Methodist Church.

Jennie was a woman who had the strength of her convictions. In one of his first letters to her, Charles Davies quoted a central tenet of Jennie's beliefs, as she had expressed it to him: "If you have a conscientious belief, it is your right to hold it." He admired her for expressing herself in this way, calling her words "noble" and confessing to "almost" worship her for uttering them.¹⁵ (ltr, 9/26/1866) If Jennie believed that she and Charles should be united in their faith and in their worship, she may have considered it her right and her obligation to stand up and profess it to her family and to the greater community.

Regardless of where her membership was, during her adult life she seemed to move freely between the two Methodist and the Presbyterian churches, raising money for all three by directing Sunday School exhibitions and other musical and dramatic entertainments. For awhile, she may have rotated among services of each of the churches on different Sundays. As discussed in the last chapter, Jennie formally withdrew her membership from the Presbyterian Church in 1887, perhaps as a result of her breakup with Charles Davies. By the time she died in 1907, she had come home to her family's faith. A Methodist Episcopal minister officiated at Jennie's funeral service, which was held in the Methodist Protestant church on Camp Hill.

To help support herself and her family, Jennie earned income in entrepreneurial ways, though not on a steady basis. An artist, she sold her paintings, mainly oil landscapes of Harpers Ferry. To advertise, she listed herself as "Artist" in the *West Virginia State Gazatteer and Business Directory*. She also wrote to soldiers who had

¹⁵ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 26 September 1866.

been stationed in Harpers Ferry during the war to find out if they might be interested in buying her art work. These solicitations met with some success. One ex-soldier from the 2nd Massachusetts and his wife, although not interested in purchasing a painting themselves, offered to take a sample of Jennie's work to the next regimental reunion where "there might be a possibility to dispose of a few." They also offered to place one of her paintings in a shop window as an advertisement and "to do the best we could to get a few orders for you."¹⁶ The local newspapers reported on the availability and then the sale of two oil paintings of Harpers Ferry by Jennie Chambers, one described as "beautifully executed" to a man in Flintstone, Maryland the other to a man in Chicago, each selling for the sum of \$25.00.¹⁷

Jennie wrote short historical articles and sent them out to dozens of publishers. She received \$50.00 for "What a School Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," which was published in Harpers Monthly in 1902.¹⁸ The same article, retitled "The Truth about John Brown by an Eye-Witness," was published as a pamphlet by the Pioneer Historical Society. She wrote essays on such varied topics as the origins of Christmas, a reflection on war, the sweet and holy spirit of song, and her impression of a gallery painting depicting a night scene in winter. She composed a lengthy tribute to Frances Willard, President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Jennie's papers and correspondence do not reflect which, if any of these essays, she submitted for publication, but they contain generic rejection letters from several publishers.

¹⁶ Mr. and Mrs. F. P. Loud, to Jennie Chambers, 29 January 1899.

¹⁷ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 22 September 1890, p3c1. *Virginia Free Press*, 15 November 1893, p3c1. *Spirit of Jefferson*, 21 November 1893, p3c3. *Spirit of Jefferson*, 24 April 1894, p2c3.

¹⁸ H.M. Alden, (?), Harper and Brothers, to Jennie Chambers, 5 June 1901.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Jennie sought steady work in the nation's capital after Charles Davies left Harpers Ferry to work for the Pension Office in Washington, D.C. in April 1881. Prevailing upon well-placed friends and relatives to make inquiries on her behalf, Jennie looked for work as a clerk for one of the Federal government departments, but she apparently was not successful at procuring any such position.¹⁹

After she moved to Washington, she took a job as a seamstress at a children's home that was "quite a distance from the city," but according to family friend, Maggie Garrett, Jennie was ill-suited to the work, the conditions were terrible, the hours long, and she was very homesick. Miss Garrett expressed concern about the effect of this job on Jennie's delicate health.²⁰ Jennie resigned from this position in September 1881 and returned home to Harpers Ferry shortly thereafter.

In the early 1880's, Jennie ventured into the Harpers Ferry retail business as proprietor of a general store, which she ran for almost a decade. Her father, who was listed as a Retail Grocer in the 1880 U.S. Census, may have been her partner, but it appeared from the store ledgers that Jennie really operated the business. She borrowed \$205.00 in her own name from her uncle Jacob Miller in 1881 and made annual interest payments on the loan. She kept the ledgers of customer accounts, and she appeared to do most of the selecting and wholesale buying of merchandise. She sold groceries, dry goods, writing supplies, aluminum cookware, nicknacks, and candy to her customers. She provided a laundry service. Although the extant ledgers showed little activity after

¹⁹ G. G. Baker, to Jennie Chambers, n.d. John Heflebower, to Hon. L. E. McComas, date illegible.

²⁰ Maggie Garrett, to Mattie Chambers, 16 September 1881.

1887, the last few accounts were not closed until early 1889.²¹ (Commonplace books, Daybooks).

Jennie's father, Edmund, head of household and principal wage earner, died in 1890. Presumably Kate Chambers continued to contribute to household expenses from her salary as a teacher. Edmund B. Chambers, who, in 1881, had begun making the rental payments to Patrick Higgins for the house on Camp Hill, continued to do so after his father's death. Jennie's next gainful employment appeared to be during the summer of 1898 when she worked as a clerk at Summit House, a tourist home.²²

In 1898 and 1899, Jennie received replies to her inquiries about doing piece work for the New York firm of Partridge & Wilcox, importers and manufacturers of stamped linens and hand painted oval novelties. The letter writers offered little encouragement, indicating that the firm was already "covered with business" and "extra busy," but in deference to Mrs. Cross (of Harpers Ferry) who had referred Jennie to them, they instructed her to "submit samples with lowest price."²³

Ten years after Edmund's death, the 1900 U.S. Census reported Mary as Head of the household she shared with her three daughters. Kate, occupation Teacher, who had been the only steady wage earner among the women, had been out of work for eleven months. Two men also lived in the Chambers' home – Forrest Littlejohn, one of Julia's sons, age twenty-one, occupation Telegraph Operator, and G. F. Farring, a boarder, age forty-six, occupation Preacher. Of all the people in the household, only Farring was employed at the time the census was taken on June 9, 1900. The Reverend George

²¹ Jennie Chambers, *Daybooks, 1880-1888*.

²² *Harpers Ferry Sentinel*, 16 July 1898, p2c3.

²³ Joseph Partridge, (?), Partridge & Wilcox, to Jennie Chambers, 18 October 1898 and 21 September 1899.

Frederick Farring, at least, had a respectable and reliable income. He was the newly appointed minister to the Camp Hill Methodist Protestant Church.²⁴

Perhaps hoping to take advantage of her experience in retail, Jennie looked into being a sales agent for a home remedy that a friend had highly recommended to her. A letter from the Office of Mrs. E. C. Mann, dated September 26, 1900, thanked Jennie for her interest in being an agent for “Mann’s wonderful catarrh remedy,” a “sure cure,” which was offered in ten and twenty-five cent size bottles. Assuring Jennie of its “perfect safety” even for the most delicate person, Mrs. Mann called the remedy “a first class medicine [that] will do all and more than it claims.”²⁵

Jennie may not have sold many bottles of Mrs. Mann’s catarrh remedy, because in June 1902 she offered to sell a portion of her book collection to Leary, Stuart & Co., the “Largest Old Book Store in America,” located in Philadelphia. Jennie must have been disappointed when the bookseller informed her “that the books named would not have value to us,” explaining, in a patronizing way, that “age alone does not give value.”²⁶

Perhaps Jennie believed that she had a vested interest in increasing circulation of *Harper’s Monthly* after the magazine published her article on John Brown’s raid because she took a job as Special Agent for Harpers’ Periodicals. In December 1903, she received a letter from the publisher encouraging her to boost her subscription sales by promoting Harpers’ periodicals as an excellent gift for Christmas or New Year’s.²⁷

Jennie’s beloved mother, Mary, died in 1902. In 1903, a wealthy relative from her mother’s side of the family, John Heflebower of Washington County, Maryland, died,

²⁴ Ralph H. Lewis, *An Historical Sketch of Camp Hill-Wesley Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia* (Harpers Ferry: Harpers Ferry Historical Association, 1996), 63.

²⁵ Mrs. E. C. Mann, to Jennie Chambers, 26 September 1900.

²⁶ Anonymous Clerk, Leary, Stuart & Co., to Jennie Chambers, 17 June 1902.

²⁷ Anonymous Clerk, Harper & Brothers, Publishers, to Jennie Chambers, 3 December 1903.

leaving an estate of \$40,000. The newspapers reported that Mr. Heflebower left \$250 to each one of his nieces, Jennie, Mattie, and Kate.²⁸ Jennie apparently felt that she and her sisters were entitled to a greater share of the estate and petitioned the court to review Mr. Heflebower's Will and Codicil. In 1905, prior to the review, she must have written to the Court in the Fourth Judicial Circuit of Maryland to plead her case. The letter she received in reply took a firm tone with her. Beginning with "My Dear Miss Chambers," Judge M. L. Kiedy (sp?) reminded her that "it will not be my province to make a Will for Mr. Heflebower; but to construe the one he left and which has been probated as his Will." He followed with "I regret your necessities; but such can not change the provisions of the Will."²⁹ No documentation suggested Jennie and her sisters received any satisfaction from this court action, but Jennie, like her father before her, was not shy about advocating for herself and her family in pursuit of what she perceived to be right.

Jennie's family made it possible for her to lead a life that suited her. Although they apparently struggled at times to make ends meet, they seemed to support her in whatever she chose to do. They certainly did not push her into matrimony. Rather, the Chambers name conferred a place and a role in Harpers Ferry society, which Jennie chose to occupy and pursue independent of marriage. Unencumbered by husband and children, she operated freely at the very center of Harpers Ferry society, energetically fulfilling her duty to family -- being useful -- but in her own way.

A Work in Progress

Jennie worked faithfully at developing and using her talents. Her enthusiasm for art, music, history, reading, writing, and discussing ideas inspired her leadership of

²⁸ *Farmers Advocate*, 14 March 1903, p3c1. *Spirit of Jefferson*, 17 March 1903, p2c2. *Virginia Free Press*, 19 March 1903, p3c6.

²⁹ M. L. Kiedy, (?), to Jennie Chambers, 5 April 1905.

Harpers Ferry's cultural life. She was a founding member of at least three literary societies: the Addisonian Association, the Pelymnian Club, and an unnamed weekly literary club. Her membership and active participation in these groups spanned a period of over twenty-five years.

The Addisonian Association honored Joseph Addison (1672-1719), an English essayist, poet, and playwright. Addison, perhaps best known for his humorous, gently satirical, and highly popular essays published in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, wrote for a wide audience of readers, but particularly for women, to improve life and manners, to praise virtue, and to elevate the taste of the general public.

Jennie's Commonplace book contained the minutes of three meetings, each held in a different member's home, all in February 1874. The programs for these meetings opened with the discussion of one of Addison's *Spectator* essays, followed by readings of poetry or prose by other well-known authors, such as Tennyson and Irving, and concluded with readings of original essays written by various members. Jennie read at all three meetings and composed essays for two. The first to serve as officers of the club were President, Reverend Mr. McFaden; Editor, Charles Davies; and Secretary, Julia Chambers. Irish born Charles Davies, known as a man "with pronounced literary tastes," may well have been instrumental in initiating and organizing the society. Unlike many other literary societies of the day, this one included both men and women members, four of whom were Jennie and her sisters.

Jennie worked diligently on the writing and the reading of her essays. A letter written from Charles Davies to Jennie reflected the amount of time and thought they both devoted to one of Jennie's presentations. Having read her essay to him one Sunday

evening, Jennie gave it to Charles to take home for further comment. In sending it back to her the next morning, he reflected on the usefulness of their consultation and on the necessity of it, if the society's purpose were to be fulfilled. Without such consultations, he wrote, "we should go on writing & writing & write no better for writing." Charles encouraged her to "take every opportunity of being [an] Essayist." He complimented her on her effort, noting, "The advantage your Essay has over the others is the familiarity of the subject, and the simplicity of the treatment: it will at once be understood and appreciated by all, learned & unlearned."³⁰

In the same letter, Charles Davies coached Jennie in the development of good public speaking skills. A man who was in great demand for speaking engagements, Davies had years of experience in front of an audience. He advised Jennie to "be cool & calm" and cautioned against going for style in the reading. Regarding elocution, he suggested she "read very slowly, and be careful to emphasize every syllable – especially the last syllable of every word... and don't begin one word, till the other has been fully pronounced."³¹ Nineteenth century women were just beginning to speak in public, usually to advance their work in areas such as temperance and other benevolent causes. Jennie's efforts to improve her skills at public speaking put her in the vanguard of the progressive women of her era.

Jennie performed in and directed many fund-raising musical and dramatic entertainments. These entertainments were popular and well attended events in which a large number of people participated. Some were held at various churches around town, some at Anthony Hall on the campus of Storer College. The money raised at these events

³⁰ Charles Davies, to Jennie Chambers, 187?

³¹ Ibid.

benefited the Methodist Protestant, Methodist Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches, and, on at least one occasion, the proceeds were used to beautify and repair the old, historic Harper cemetery.

Although Jennie herself was not specifically named in the *Spirit of Jefferson's* 1868 review of the Union Sunday School Exhibition, this production must have been similar to the entertainments Jennie directed. Many of Jennie's friends and relatives were mentioned in the newspaper article. All of the dramatic pieces were written by Charles Davies, Jennie's suitor, and three of the stars were Julia Chambers, Jennie's sister, Clifton Littlejohn, Julia's future husband, and Arnold Yantis, Jennie's lifelong friend.

The production, which ran for two evenings, drew an audience from Harpers Ferry and the surrounding towns. Held at the Lutheran Church, it played to a full house. People eager to attend were turned away at the door. Quite elaborate, the entertainment consisted of three parts – Recitations; a temperance drama entitled “The Lawyers Oath,” followed by some “light and airy” dramatic pieces “after the manner of French Vaudville [sic];” and a series of Tableaux, the whole interspersed with choir singing. The Tableaux, which the reviewer considered “perfectly beautiful, astonishing, and delighting every beholder,” covered a wide range of subjects: “Crowning the May Queen,” “Jacob and Rachel at the Well,” “Old Woman Spinning,” “The Three Graces,” “The School Mistress,” “The Duel,” “The Death of the Duelist,” “Scene from the Temperance Drama,” “Results of Woman's Suffrage,” “The Last Appeal,” “The Ghost of Caesar Appearing to Brutus,” “The Light of Other Days,” “Amputation on the Battlefield,” “Faith,” “William Tell Shooting at the Apple on the Child's Head,” and “The Marriage.”

The reviewer concluded that for both actors and audience the Exhibition offered “two most agreeable and well-spent evenings.”³²

In addition to cultivating her musical and dramatic talents, Jennie studied art and painting. When she visited art galleries in Washington, D. C., she kept notes on the artists and paintings she admired. In early August 1883, Jennie received a letter from Mrs. L. L. Swasey pledging her assistance in securing Jennie’s admission to the art school at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Mrs. Swasey conveyed the school’s admission requirements, advising Jennie to paint a small landscape in oil, which, once received, she and her daughter would take to the school. Encouraging Jennie to “do your best,” Mrs. Swasey felt “quite certain we can, with little or no trouble, succeed in accomplishing what you desire.”

Six weeks later, Jennie received another letter from Mrs. Swasey. This kind sponsor had just returned home from seeing the Director of the Corcoran, “elated” at Jennie’s prospects for gaining admission to the school, only to find Jennie’s letter awaiting her with disappointing news. In it, Jennie explained that she would be unable to pursue her aspirations to study art in Washington, D.C. because she was needed at home to care for her aging parents. One wonders if Jennie abandoned her application solely out of concern for her parents’ health, or because she had just learned of Charles’ August 30th marriage to Louisa Warren? Whatever the real reason or reasons for Jennie’s decision to remain in Harpers Ferry, Mrs. Swasey wrote back that she was “sorry.” While affirming that Jennie was “quite right” to fulfill her duty to her parents, she also noted “it is very sweet of you to prefer their comfort to your own wishes.”³³

³² *Spirit of Jefferson*, 25 February 1868. *Virginia Free Press*, 27 February 1868, p3c1.

³³ Mrs. L. L. Swasey, to Jennie Chambers, 3 August and 30 September 1883.

Jennie continued to study painting in Harpers Ferry. Among her papers, she kept a well-worn, paint-spattered sheet that contained her extensive notes about how to mix various colors. She filled another page with notes on Perspective. On yet another well-worn sheet, Jennie credited Professor Thomas Chenoweth as the source of instructions on the “Art of Changing Photos and Lithographs Into Oil Paintings on Glass.” Jennie may have been interested in learning this technique because it was a marketable and affordable way for her potential customers to own what looked like original art. Jennie concluded her detailed notes about this technique with the admonition, “Keep This a Secret,” which might lead one to believe that the entrepreneurial Jennie sought to corner the Harpers Ferry market for oil paintings on glass.

Throughout the decade of the 1890's, the *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory* listed several artists in Harpers Ferry. In addition to Jennie, the 1891-92 edition listed four artists, three of them women, all identifiable as Jennie's friends and relatives. It was quite possible that these women constituted their own small artist's colony, in which they learned from one another, as well as sustained and supported each other. The local newspaper suggested such a network by reporting on a trip made by two of the artists, namely Jennie and Mrs. Brackett, to visit prominent Halltown citizens Mr. and Mrs. George Koonce, where they enjoyed viewing Mrs. Koonce's clay models and oil paintings.

Louise Wood Brackett, wife of Nathan C. Brackett, the principal of Storer College, was an accomplished portraitist and taught drawing, as well as other subjects, at the college. Jennie may have taken one of Mrs. Brackett's classes. Jennie and Lettie, as Louise was known, seemed particularly close. Jennie's father and Lettie's husband were

political allies and activists, and the two women travelled in the same circles, sharing an interest in art, temperance, and community betterment. They both assumed leadership in the organizations to which they belonged, often serving as officers on the same boards.

Reformer and Preservationist

In addition to improving herself, Jennie set her sights on both reforming and preserving the community. She accomplished her goals by respecting nineteenth century expectations concerning gender roles, not by challenging them. In her womanly way, she labored for the love of God and His earthly creation, her activity aligned with the conviction that a true Christian was a useful one. In being useful, she found freedom, purpose, interconnectedness, independence, respectability, and a public role.

Her benevolent activities fell into three categories of charitable work, which Christine Jacobson Carter identified in *Southern Single Blessedness*, her study of unmarried women in the antebellum, urban South. One category was church work and organizations such as Sunday schools and tract societies. A second category was benevolent societies that were not part of church structure but which incorporated Christian evangelism or teachings. A third category focused on secular causes such as historic preservation or civic issues that local, state, or national government often already had attempted to address. Carter noted that although the women she studied in Charleston and Savannah embraced the ethic of usefulness, benevolence, and reform long before the war, the Civil War was a “watershed” in women’s public involvement. Jennie’s public involvement occurred after this watershed, when many more women were either forced or invited to assume new roles of charity and organization.³⁴

³⁴ Carter, 122.

In the nineteenth century South, church work became the domain of women.

Although church leadership was almost exclusively male, more women than men filled the pews. Since women were acknowledged to be the more religious sex and morally superior to men, the church provided the perfect incubator for women's involvement outside the home. Otherwise isolated within their families, women within the church became a valuable resource for getting work done. Working together to advance the church's mission, women discovered opportunities for introspection, purpose, emotional support, and community.³⁵

By moving freely between three churches, Jennie's opportunities for involvement and networking multiplied. She likely found spiritual and intellectual sustenance in the form of theology, music, sermons, Sunday School classes, and volunteer work. Jennie appeared to spend a great deal of time at church. Whenever Charles Davies called upon Jennie and found that she was not at home, he assumed that she was at church. When Charles and Jennie went out together, they often attended lectures, Sunday School exhibitions, or worship services at local churches.

Jennie's church work gave her an opportunity to do good and to be recognized for her leadership as well as for her artistic and creative abilities. She raised funds for her churches and their programs by staging musical and dramatic entertainments. They were fairly large productions, in which she must have coordinated many activities and directed a significant number of people. In newspaper notices about these events, she was listed as one of two in charge. In addition to raising money, these events elevated the cultural life of Harpers Ferry. As an Addisonian disciple, Jennie might have appreciated the

³⁵ Ibid., 122-13.

beneficial effects of these entertainments on inculcating virtue and raising the general level of refinement and social discourse among the citizenry.

Another aspect of church work in which Jennie may have tried to reach the hearts, minds, and souls of the people of Harpers Ferry was by disseminating religious tracts, pamphlets, books, and periodicals. Tract societies appealed directly to women to do their work, and they provided an opportunity for women to participate directly in advancing Christianity. Although the reading materials were most often non-sectarian, denominational churches sanctioned and encouraged women to visit church families and distribute them. Thus, tract societies gave women a purpose for organizing themselves, a church-approved vehicle for getting out of the house and into the community, and an avenue for fulfilling the desire and obligation to be useful.³⁶

Jennie preserved several religious tracts in the form of monthly booklets written by H. L. Hastings and published by the Scriptural Tract Repository in 1888. One, designated as "Author's Complete Edition," was entitled "Shall We Meet Beyond the River?" She also kept a communication from the Office of The Guide to Holiness, 14 Bible House, New York. In what appeared to be a form letter addressed to "Dear Christian Friend," Mr. W. C. Palmer, Jr. thanked her for her former efforts on behalf of "the cause of holiness" and exhorted her to "begin your efforts for subscribers at once." By placing the "Guide" in the hands of people of all denominations, Jennie's influence might be the "means of leading many...into the highway of Holiness." Mr. Palmer closed with the reminder: "Do the work thoroughly, & God's reward will be far greater than any this world can give."³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 124-125.

³⁷ W. C. Palmer, to "Dear Christian Friend" (Jennie Chambers), 25 November 1892.

Jennie shared a passion for temperance with her father, and like him, she belonged to several Christian temperance societies. Jennie's devotion to this cause fell into Carter's second category of charitable work, benevolent organizations that were not part of church structure but which incorporated Christian evangelism or teachings. The Lodge of Good Templars, one such society, admitted both men and women into its membership. Organized in Syracuse, New York in 1851 to promote worldwide prohibition and total abstinence for the individual, it also sought to prohibit the making, buying, selling, using, furnishing, or causing to be furnished any form of alcohol. Although it was not a political organization, its members had a duty to support the election of sober, temperance-supporting men to office. Good Templars pledged total abstinence themselves and recruited others in the community, including its youth, to sign similar pledges. Lodge members offered support for recovering alcoholics. Jennie Chambers, William B. Chambers, Jennie's nephew, and Louise Wood Brackett served as officers of the local chapter.³⁸

While the Lodge of Good Templars brought men and women together to advance its solemn crusade against the evils of alcohol, membership conferred social benefits as well. Jennie's first cousin, William Castle, joined a lodge in Bridgeport, Connecticut. While William may have been interested in temperance, he seemed equally interested in meeting girls. In a letter to his mother, Jennie's Aunt Lydia, he wrote: "Tell Jennie Chambers that I united with the G. T. Lodge here last Friday evening. The lodge will visit the South Norwalk lodge next Wednesday evening and I may go with them for a good time. All the Pretty Girls in Bgpt. belong to the G. Templars."³⁹

³⁸ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 3 July 1888, p3c3.

³⁹ William Castle, to Lydia Castle, 17 January 1887.

While Jennie believed in total abstinence, she also demonstrated an understanding and compassion for those who were trying to conquer their addiction to drink. In an essay entitled “Drunkard,” in her handwriting but unsigned, she acknowledged that there was “but one way to cure drunkenness [sic],” which was to “exercise a firm will and utterly refuse to take any wine or spiritous liquors.” On the other hand, she offered sympathetic encouragement to those who relapsed: “If you break your resolution once, twice, three times, or many times, do not despair, but begin again, and every time you gain a victory, you will be strengthened to gain another.”

In this essay, Jennie included two “prescriptions” to assist in self recovery from alcoholism, or, in her words, “dypsomania” [sic]: one, a tonic containing sulphate of iron, peppermint, and nutmeg; the other, very strong coffee. She showed a compassionate familiarity with, as well as a sophisticated knowledge about, the difficulties of withdrawal, insisting “something must be taken as liquor is left off to prevent that absolute physical and moral prostration that follows a sudden abandonment of the use of stimulating drinks.”⁴⁰

Jennie served as President of the local chapter the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Frances Willard herself, the renowned President of the national organization, inducted Jennie into office and “pinned the white ribbon on my heart” at the ceremony held in the Methodist Episcopal church in Bolivar. When Miss Willard died, Jennie wrote a stirring and loving tribute to her, which she addressed to the members of the local chapter. Jennie explained to her audience that she offered this “humble” tribute because “my admiration for her is so sincere and my sorrow at her death is so deep.”

⁴⁰ Jennie Chambers, (?), “Drunkard.”

Jennie may have felt particularly close to Miss Willard because they had similar temperaments and had encouraging, supportive mothers. In describing Frances Willard as a child, Jennie might well have been describing herself: “When a child she was precocious, self-willed and impetuous, but conscientious, devout, and affectionate.” Willard’s childhood, Jennie observed, yielded “a life calm and sweet spirited, that never lacked dignity and reserve or a spirit of toleration.” Miss Willard, born in a day “when the horizen [sic] of her sex was closely drawn,” was fortunate enough to have a mother “who saw that it could be widened, and must be widened, and did what she could herself to widen it.” Mrs. Willard gave her daughter a “glorious watchword” when she instructed her to “enter every open door.” Miss Willard’s “fine home training,” which was “perhaps the best preparation she had for the work before her,” compared well to Jennie’s own. Jennie’s mother placed a high value on education for women, and she made sacrifices and worked hard to ensure that each of her daughters received one.

In praising Miss Willard, whom she considered “truly great,” Jennie gave her audience in 1898, as well as her audience today, a clear expression of her own values. She profoundly admired Willard’s accomplishments in emancipating women and children from the “dreadful curse of intemperance” and in advocating industrial training for women. Believing Miss Willard to be “a shining example for all reformers,” Jennie described her gifts – as orator, organizer, prophetess, and leader – and the qualities of character -- bravery, strength, power, magnetism, humor, diplomacy, sweetness, generosity, faith, fidelity, and selflessness – which she brought to bear in her work, all done “out of love for her fellow creatures.”

Jennie perhaps most admired the moral courage it took for Frances Willard to heed her mother's advice to "enter every open door." She recognized Miss Willard as a woman of extraordinary strength – one who commanded an army of women, 250,000 strong – the membership of the Women's Christian Temperance Union – yet, and here was the crux of it for Jennie, Willard was "sweet and tender and womanly in all her ways." Jennie believed that moral courage was, after all, "as proper and as natural in the weaker as in the stronger sex," but she was in awe of the reformer who "was not afraid of being thought unwomanly or strong minded, or a usurper of masculine privileges."

Jennie possessed moral courage herself from the time she was a young girl, and she perhaps aspired to Miss Willard's fearlessness in demonstrating it, but she seemed to place greatest value on Willard's ability to accomplish important goals without offending society's expectations of her as a woman. Jennie admired a womanly woman who knew how to get things done, one who "so magnanimously" contended for truth and principle that "she never irritated good people who differed from her." Jennie wanted to preserve and improve Harpers Ferry, not overturn it. She wanted and needed to work within the male-dominated system to accomplish her goals. Her highest praise for Willard was that she possessed "every trait that good men honor in women." Willard was sweet, winning, charming, smart, clever, and tough all at the same time, certainly a winning and worthy combination in Jennie's opinion, one she, by all accounts, appeared to model in her own life.⁴¹

The third category of charitable work that Jennie undertook was civic projects to preserve Harpers Ferry's history, to improve its appearance and livability, and to boost its economy. The Harpers Ferry Rural Improvement Association incorporated all of the

⁴¹ Chambers, Jennie, "It is not Always by Words....," [1898].

above goals. In June 1883 local newspapers reported the formation of this association following a “brilliant” lecture entitled “The Future of Harpers Ferry” delivered by a Professor Northrop(e) of Connecticut. The professor began his lecture by describing the great natural beauty of Harpers Ferry, claiming “he had never seen anything to surpass it,” then pointed out the natural facilities it afforded as a summer resort for people from the nearby cities of Baltimore and Washington. He went on to declare how by an outlay of labor and capital these advantages might be increased to invite outside investment and permanent residents as well.

Apparently many influential people in town attended this lecture held in the Methodist Protestant Church on Camp Hill, and they were inspired to organize. They elected two men and two women as officers: The Reverend J. A. McFaden, President; Mr. J. Garland Hurst, Vice-President; Mrs. B. Crookston, Secretary, and Miss Jennie Chambers, Treasurer. The Executive Committee included several local businessmen, their wives, and the Reverend N. C. Brackett, principal of Storer College. The group adopted ambitious and far-reaching goals, namely “to cultivate public spirit; quicken intellectual life; promote good fellowship; secure better hygienic conditions in homes and surroundings; and build up and beautify Harpers Ferry, enhance value of property and render inviting as a place of residence and summer resort.”⁴²

This association preceded and may have given birth to another founded by Lower Town businessmen in 1884. The second organization, called the Harpers Ferry General Improvement Company, incorporated to encourage manufacturing, community hygiene, and beautification and to promote Harpers Ferry as a permanent place of residence and summer resort. It seemed to focus on promoting and encouraging the town’s industrial

⁴² *Spirit of Jefferson*, 5 June 1883, p3c2. *Virginia Free Press*, 7 June 1883, p3c1.

development, and it may have been comprised solely of businessmen and merchants.⁴³

Although Jennie operated her grocery business during this period, she may not have been directly involved in the work of this company. She was, however, among the leaders who recognized the need for such a group and laid the foundation for it.

Another project to which Jennie and other ladies in Harpers Ferry devoted considerable energy was the restoration and repair of the old cemetery on Camp Hill. They raised money for the project by staging a dramatic and musical entertainment, and Jennie served on the Entertainment Committee. In an effort to appeal to a larger donor base than just the local citizenry, the ladies published a notice entitled "Let us remember our dead ones," in which they solicited contributions from "friends living at a distance" whose loved ones' graves were lying in "a sad and neglected state." They indicated that any contribution would be acceptable, "however small the amount."⁴⁴ Six weeks later, Jennie participated in another entertainment to benefit the old cemetery, this one a concert of the Bolivar Glee Club.⁴⁵

Jennie continued to tend the Harper Cemetery for the rest of her life. This activity seemed to be reserved almost exclusively for women. In 1895, Jennie led a successful drive to raise funds for general improvement of the cemetery and to build a Sexton's House on the grounds. The fundraiser was a baby show, for which an entry fee was charged. All entrants earned the privilege of having their names inscribed inside the corner stone of the Sexton's House, once it was built. First prize went to Shirley Nichols, aged eight months, who received 209 votes. The net profits of the show and festival, held

⁴³ Paul A. Shackel, *Culture Change and the New Technology : An Archaeology of the Early American Industrial Era* (New York/London: Plenum Press, 1996), 50.

⁴⁴ *Spirit of Jefferson*, 10 April, 1883, p3c2.

⁴⁵ *Virginia Free Press*, 31 May 1883, p2c3.

August 29, 1895 in Chambers Park, Camp Hill, were reported as \$33.50 and placed into a building fund.⁴⁶

Jennie also served as Secretary on the organizing committees of at least two Decoration Day ceremonies to honor the graves of Harpers Ferry citizens. At one event, with a “large turnout of ladies, misses, and a *sprinkling* of gents” (italics mine), organizers donated a large U.S. flag.⁴⁷ According to a notice for another ceremony held the following year, perhaps planned to be a grander affair, the choirs of the protestant churches were invited to render music (interestingly excluding the Catholic Church choir) and attorney Raymond Dickey was scheduled to deliver an address.⁴⁸

On her own, Jennie promoted tourism of Harpers Ferry by maintaining a lively correspondence with former Union soldiers who had encamped and fought there during the Civil War. She kept Harpers Ferry alive in their hearts and minds, inviting them to bring their families to see where they had served their country and encouraging them to reminisce. She wrote about old times and sent her paintings of the beautiful Harpers Ferry countryside. Gideon N. Caleb, a former Union soldier turned successful Chicago businessman, who as a young man had developed a romantic interest in Jennie while camped on her father’s farm, thanked her for her letters and for a painting he had recently commissioned from her.⁴⁹ William H. Hall, from Allston, Massachusetts, acknowledged receipt of a “blue book” she sent, perhaps containing a collection of her writings about the “never to be forgotten days” of Harpers Ferry during the Civil War.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ “The Baby Show,” Unattributed newspaper clipping, 1895, West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.

⁴⁷ *Farmers Advocate*, 2 June 1900, p3c4.

⁴⁸ *Virginia Free Press*, 22 May 1901, p3c6. *Spirit of Jefferson*, 28 May 1901, p2c6.

⁴⁹ Gideon N. Caleb, to Jennie Chambers, 29 April 1894.

⁵⁰ William H. Hall, to Jennie Chambers, 3 June 1900.

One of Harpers Ferry's biggest, and over time most controversial, tourist attractions before, during, and after the Civil War was John Brown's "fort," actually the engine and guard house for the old armory, from which Brown and his men made their last stand. A site of interest for the curious before the war, a rallying place for Northern soldiers during the war, the building became a target for souvenir hunters who carried away many of its bricks. The fire alarm bell atop the old engine house, rumored to have been rung by John Brown to rally the slaves in the surrounding countryside, fell prey to souvenir hunters also. The men of the 13th Massachusetts, Company I, seeking a relic from the historic town of Harpers Ferry, liberated the bell from its tower in 1861, stored it at the home of their camp cook in Williamsport, Maryland for thirty-one years, and finally installed it on the front of Post 43 of the Grand Army of the Republic in Marlborough, Massachusetts in 1892.⁵¹

In the 1880's, Thomas Savery purchased the armory grounds, which included the old engine house. He painted the words "John Brown's Fort" on the building and marketed it as a tourist attraction. Savery also made some of the bricks into souvenirs, pasting a steel engraving of the fort on each one, and presenting them to family, friends, and a few distinguished Americans in satin-lined leather-covered boxes.⁵² In 1891, the John Brown Fort Company, comprised of Washington, D. C. businessmen, purchased the building, which they dismantled and reconstructed as a museum near the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

⁵¹ Al Masters, "Stealing John Brown's Bell," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 40, no. 2 (2001): 46-49.

⁵² Paul A. Shackel, "John Brown's Fort : A Contested National Symbol," in *Terrible Swift Sword : The Legacy of John Brown*, ed. Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 181.

In 1895, Miss Mary Katherine Field, a journalist, lecturer, and actress from Washington, D. C., instigated the rescue of the building from Chicago and its return to Harpers Ferry. Miss Field, a woman interested in social reform for black Americans after the Civil War, previously had been instrumental in raising funds to save John Brown's farm and grave from ruin in North Elba, New York. Her vision for Harpers Ferry was to re-erect John Brown's fort close to Storer College at the center of a park.

The fort restoration was surrounded by a great deal of controversy in Harpers Ferry, in part, perhaps, because it was initiated by a woman and an outsider at that. Many voiced their opinions in a debate reminiscent of the one two years earlier when the historic building was first sold and removed to a site near the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In 1893, the prospect of losing the landmark had evoked great joy in some citizens and utter devastation in others.⁵³

In 1895, the prospect of its return evoked a similar range of emotions, with the addition of fear sparked by the rumor that Miss Field intended to make the old engine house a memorial to the villainous raiders. Some speculated that the journalist planned to disinter the bodies of the insurgents buried along the Shenandoah and rebury them on the site with the restored fort. The *Spirit of Jefferson* printed the rumor in an editorial and declared that any attempt to memorialize Brown's "crew" was "going just a little too far." In a letter to the newspaper published on October 5, 1895, Miss Field's attorney, Robert McCabe, quelled the rumors, calling them totally unfounded, assuring readers that Miss Field had "no intention of offending your people."⁵⁴

⁵³ Barry, 58.

⁵⁴ Clarence S. Gee, "John Brown's Fort," *West Virginia History* 9, no. 2 (1958): 98.

From the beginning, Jennie's brother, Edmund, was directly involved in returning and restoring the fort. His employer, the B&O Railroad, wanted to encourage tourism on the railroad line, and perhaps at Edmund's own initiative and behest, offered to move the fort to a site near its original location at no charge. The railroad also offered free passes to anyone working on the restoration and granted Edmund the time away from his regular duties to assist Miss Field and Mr. McCabe on their visits to Harpers Ferry.⁵⁵ Edmund eventually helped Field secure a site for the fort -- seven acres on Mr. Alexander Murphy's farm, Buena Vista, formerly his father's property. This site offered enough acreage for the restored fort and a park, along with a beautiful view for future summer homes. It could be seen easily by passengers from the B&O train as it passed over Virginius Island.⁵⁶

According to one writer, Clarence Gee, who claimed to have heard the story from Robert McCabe himself, Jennie's brother also played a very hands-on role in overseeing the fort's reconstruction. When complaints reached McCabe about the restoration, he travelled to Harpers Ferry to consult his contact there, Edmund B. Chambers. Mr. Chambers informed him that the out-of-town contractor who had been hired to do the work, a Mr. Cummins, had outraged the community by calling them rebels. Furthermore, Cummins was lazy, abusive, intolerant, incompetent, and he refused to pay the men who worked for him. Work was progressing slowly because all Cummins did was fish. Chambers declared that the townspeople could not allow this thing to stand and that "this

⁵⁵ Charlotte J. Fairbairn, *John Brown's Fort : Armory Engine and Guard House 1848-1961* (Harpers Ferry, WV: Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, 1961). Addenda: Charles O. Scull, to E. B. Chambers, 22 July 1895.

⁵⁶ Gee: 97.

man must be gotten out of here.” McCabe tried to resolve the matter with Cummins, but the contractor brandished his contract and insisted he would see the work through.

Edmund Chambers, who was, according to McCabe, “proficient in many lines and ...held in high regard by all the local citizens,” found a way to get rid of the man. Very well-connected, Edmund appealed to some of the “boys” in town to take Mr. Cummins for a swim in the Shenandoah. After his involuntary dip, the frightened contractor was eager to be released from his contract, selling it back to McCabe for fifty dollars and then leaving town on the 4:00 a.m. train. Edmund, a man of his word, subsequently accepted the responsibility of overseeing the restoration, but he refused a contract, preferring to do the work out of a sense of honor. The project experienced no further delays, and, in McCabe’s judgment, “the Harpers Ferry station agent saved the day.”⁵⁷

Although no evidence pointed to Jennie’s participation in the matter, it is reasonable to assume that Jennie actively, and perhaps publicly, advocated for the return of John Brown’s fort to Harpers Ferry. Jennie, more than most, understood the building’s historic significance to Harpers Ferry and the nation, as well as its value to the town as a tourist destination. In addition, with controversy and contention about the project percolating throughout the small town, Jennie would have been loyal to her brother’s interests. It is impossible to tell if Jennie would have sanctioned her brother’s Draconian approach to solving labor problems, but having a practical side, she may have seen some merit in it.

Finally, Jennie may have supported the project because she was intrigued by Kate Field, a single woman like herself. Although reputedly flamboyant and colorful, Miss Field was fair of face and figure and, as a successful writer, publisher, lecturer, and

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 99-100.

actress, she was accomplished in areas that Jennie admired. In the area of fundraising, in which Jennie also had some experience, Miss Field showed unusual creativity and initiative, persuading men to donate either money or services to enable her work. Whether or not Miss Field fully lived up to Jennie's standard of the womanly woman, she acted as a catalyst for progress in Harpers Ferry, a role that Jennie would not fail to appreciate.

Perhaps not coincidentally in the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld segregation in Plessy v. Ferguson, John Brown's fort became a symbol in the struggle for racial equality. In July 1896, the first national convention of the National League of Colored Women met in Washington, D. C., and the women of the Pilgrim Party took a day trip to visit the fort at the Murphy farm.⁵⁸

Ten years later, the Niagara Movement, the predecessor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), held its second annual meeting at Harpers Ferry. In celebration of the life of John Brown, at six o'clock in the morning of August 17, 1906, the nearly one hundred conference participants walked about a mile to the engine house. When they got close to the site, they removed their shoes and socks, treading barefoot, as if walking on holy ground. W. E. B. Du Bois delivered a stirring address at this conference, thanking God for John Brown, and echoing the words of the "Old Man" himself in calling for the second American Revolution to fulfill the promise of the first: "The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false in

⁵⁸ Shackel, "John Brown's Fort : A Contested National Symbol," 184.

founding, become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the slave – a byword and a hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful accomplishments.”⁵⁹

Six months prior to the historic Niagara conference at Harpers Ferry, Jennie suffered a paralytic and apoplectic stroke during the night. She and her sisters had attended a lecture at Storer College earlier in the evening, and the next morning one of her sisters found her unconscious on the floor of her room.⁶⁰

She had recovered enough by November to remind her fellow citizens of their local history. As a correspondent to the *Harpers Ferry Times*, she wrote an account, published in two installments, of some history connected to a newly dedicated park on Camp Hill. She noted that a locust tree in front of a cottage now owned by her sister Kate, located opposite the new park, was the site of the near-lynching of Shields Green, one of John Brown’s raiders. Apparently Green was saved from the infuriated crowd by a man who mistakenly identified Green as the coachman for Dr. Wager, one of Harpers Ferry’s most prominent citizens. She also noted that a small oak in the east end of the park was raised from an acorn taken from the Kennedy farm in Maryland, where the Brown party had their headquarters for six months prior to the raid.⁶¹

Ever alert to fundraising opportunities, Jennie pointed out the future commercial potential oak’s acorns. Understanding the value of anything associated with John Brown, ✓ she noted that “in time the acorns might be sold for the benefit of the Park, as souvenirs, in connection with other things, such as canes,” presumably cut from the tree’s branches. Tourists, she remarked, “are glad to get them,” noting that in historic Gettysburg “canes

⁵⁹ Ibid. Quoting W. E. B. Du Bois in W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, Vol I, 1890-1919, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, Pathfinder, 1970), 170-173.

⁶⁰ *Harpers Ferry Times*, 9 February 1906, p5c1.

⁶¹ *Harpers Ferry Times*, 2 November 1906, p5c1 and 9 November 1906, n.p.

are sold at from 25 cents to several dollars.” Remonstrating about the failure to capitalize on former opportunities, she wrote, “We have been too tardy in regard to our historical points and many a dime could have been made for the benefit of the town had we been less so.” She regretted that “Harpers Ferry has, in many different ways, sold her birthright.” Jennie urged the townspeople to do better in the future.⁶²

In her role as doyenne of Harpers Ferry history, and as the proud daughter of the late Edmund Chambers, Jennie also wrote to correct a popular misconception about the origin of the cannon, recently placed in the park. According to Jennie, this cannon was a true Civil War relic, and not the old one that stood by the powder magazine on Camp Hill before the war, as “some of our old walking encyclopedias” erroneously believed. To satisfy “the curious,” and also the doubters, among her readers, she referred them to the date on the cannon, inscribed as 1861.⁶³

Jennie was in a unique position to know about the cannon. Her father, with the help of his old friend U.S. Senator Charles James Faulkner, Sr., procured the cannon from the U.S. Government for the Harpers Ferry centennial celebration of July 4, 1876. Mr. Chambers was mayor of Harpers Ferry at the time. When the cannon arrived it was placed on Magazine Hill, a place later occupied by Hill-Top House, a popular hotel. When it was fired on the fourth of July 1876, the cannon’s “echoes reverberated over the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, from the Blue Ridge Mountains in Maryland to those in Virginia, bringing back memories of the late Civil War.” The memory of cannon fire

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

may have also reverberated in Jennie's heart, bringing back powerful memories of her youth.⁶⁴

Jennie's article for the *Harpers Ferry Times* may have been her last. She died May 10, 1907, six months after it was published. Although she did not live long enough to see the historic landmark of John Brown's fort moved to the Storer College campus a few years later, Jennie might well have appreciated the symbolic significance of placing the old engine house on the grounds of this institution dedicated to the education of freedmen, and she may well have understood its hallowed importance to the students. She knew the college and its students well through her friendship with two of its founders, the Reverend N. C. Brackett and his wife, Louise.

Despite her ties to the college and its founders, however, Jennie, ever a purist at heart, may have been most happy when the building was moved in 1968 to its present location at the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Today, it rests approximately one hundred and fifty feet from its original site in an area that used to be, in 1859, the old armory yard.

In keeping with the diverse denominational affiliations she displayed in life, Jennie's funeral was ecumenical. The service was held in the Methodist Protestant Church, Camp Hill, attended by "a large number of her admiring and true friends." The Reverend Feltner, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, officiated, and the Reverend N. C. Brackett, a Free Will Baptist, delivered the sermon. In it, Brackett was "unstinted in his praise" for his friend, describing her as "public-spirited" and a "bright light." He noted that "her passing leaves a large void in the community." No doubt in honor of her

⁶⁴ Jennie Chambers, "History of the Old Cannon on Camp Hill," West Virginia Collection, University of West Virginia, Morgantown, WV.

appreciation for all things literary, he closed by reading selections from two poets, identified only as Bryant and Priest in the newspaper notice, but presumably the nineteenth century writers, Nancy Amelia Woodbury Priest (Wakefield) and William Cullen Bryant.⁶⁵

Perhaps the Reverend Brackett read Nancy Priest's most famous poem, (written under her maiden name before she married Lt. Arlington C. Wakefield), entitled "Over the River." Although this sentimental and popular poem was probably read at countless funerals in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it somehow, in many ways, seems uniquely appropriate for Jennie's. If read to those friends and relatives gathered in her memory in early May, it may well have evoked Jennie Chambers' spirit, her faith, her dear departed mother and father, and the beautiful rivers and hills surrounding Edenic Harpers Ferry, the "Old home" of her fathers, the place she loved and cherished. The poem, published in 1857, concludes with this stanza:

And I sit and think, when the sunset's gold
 Is flushing river, and hill, and shore,
 I shall one day stand by the water cold,
 And list for the sound of the boatman's oar;
 I shall watch for a gleam of the flapping sail;
 I shall hear the boat as it gains the stand;
 I shall pass from sight, with the boatman pale,
 To the better shore of the spirit land;
 I shall know the loved who have gone before, --
 And joyfully sweet will the meeting be,
 And over the river, the peaceful river,
 The Angel of Death shall carry me.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *Farmers Advocate*, 18 May 1907 1907, p2c2.

⁶⁶ Charles A. Dana, *The Household Book of Poetry* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1879), 730.

CONCLUSION

Two weeks after Jennie Chambers' death, the Reverend Arnold S. Yantis, a family friend, published a tribute to her in the local newspaper. In it, he painted a portrait of a thoroughly human and remarkable woman. He described her intellectual gifts, her artistic talent, and her love of the beautiful. He wrote of her contributions to the community and to her fellow man, characterizing her as "warmly and intelligently interested in all movements for the moral and social progress of the town" and as "a recognized force in its best life." He revealed that "her greatest delight was in promoting some plan or enterprise for the public good."

Jennie contributed to the cultural, moral, and social progress of Harpers Ferry in many ways. An active participant and patron of the arts, she drew others into her creative enterprises. She enhanced the town's cultural life by staging musical and dramatic entertainments, often for the benefit of charities and civic projects, and by founding and organizing several literary societies. She educated people about Harpers Ferry's unique history and advocated for its preservation, while at the same time seeking to improve the town's appearance and livability. She organized a group of women to oversee the cleanup and maintenance of the town's oldest cemetery and to plan annual commemorations to honor those who had gone before. A founding member of the Harpers Ferry Rural Improvement Association, she served as its first Treasurer. She promoted historical tourism to stimulate the town's economic growth.

She cared deeply about the physical and spiritual welfare of the citizens of Harpers Ferry, especially its women and children. She worked tirelessly for the cause of temperance, serving as President of the local chapter of the Women's Christian

Temperance Union and holding several offices in the Lodge of Good Templars.

Additionally, she practiced her own religious beliefs by carrying God's word to others, serving on the organizing committees for Sunday School and camp meetings and distributing religious tracts throughout the community.

In his memorial, the Reverend Yantis went on to characterize Jennie as a woman of strong faith, taking care to note her religion "was not the flimsy stuff of noisy profession." He linked her desire to be useful to her faith in God, declaring, "To her, godliness was goodness in action." Yantis also praised Jennie for her high standards, describing how she "dignified her sphere with patient devotion to the best." Her "creed of creeds," according to her old friend, was "the loveliness of perfect deeds." In offering thanksgiving for her life, Yantis intoned that God was well-pleased because "she hath done what she could."¹

The twenty-first century reader might consider the pronouncement, "she hath done what she could," as damning with faint praise, but Yantis' early twentieth century audience would not find it so. Jennie used exactly the same phrase to eulogize Frances Willard, the "lovely and masterful woman" she so greatly admired. In tribute to Miss Willard's dedication to advancing the causes of women and temperance, Jennie wrote: "'She hath done what she could' and how great it is, and how well it was done."

In many ways, the two women were much alike. The words Jennie used to describe Frances Willard might also be applied to herself. Both women had mothers who believed in the value of the education for women and who instilled in them the moral courage to "enter every open door." Both gave of themselves, not for love of power, or selfish purpose, but "out of love for her fellow creatures." Each woman made sacrifices

¹ *Farmers Advocate*, 25 May 1907, p3c4.

to pursue her own highly refined sense of duty. One of the qualities Jennie most admired in Frances Willard was that “she was never untrue to her conceptions of duty, however much it might cost her to be faithful.”

Jennie looked up to Frances Willard as a pioneer, a “prophetess,” a woman ahead of her time. She marvelled at Miss Willard’s ability to lead and to wield power, while being “sweet and tender and womanly in all her ways.” For Jennie, Frances Willard was “a shining example for all reformers” precisely because she could “so magnanimously...contend for truth and principle that she never irritated good people who differed from her.” Perhaps Jennie’s highest praise for Willard was that she possessed “every trait that good men honor in women.”²

Jennie may not have felt it within her grasp to exude the same magnetism or to possess the “sort of fascination” Miss Willard used to such advantage, but Jennie, too, accomplished a great deal while remaining “sweet and tender and womanly in her ways.” Jennie, whose heart had been touched with fire in her youth, had been tested by invasion and war. As a grown woman, she knew well that she was capable of courage, and that she, like Frances Willard, possessed the moral and mental strength, as well as the confidence to get things done. Eschewing a husband, she devoted her life to serving her greatest loves, which were inextricably intertwined – her faith, her family, and the community of Harpers Ferry. Within her known world, she accomplished what she could by selflessly and creatively building a life of usefulness. In so doing, she wore the Chambers’ mantle well, doing the family proud and carrying their legacy into the next and succeeding generations.

² Jennie Chambers, "It Is Not Always by Words.... 1898 ?."

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